



# GLIMPSES OF WOMEN IN INDIA

SHANTHA KRISHNASWAMY  
University of the Philippines

ASHISH PUBLISHING HOUSE  
8/81, PUNJABI BAGH  
NEW DELHI-110026



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to place on record my indebtedness to all those who have helped me to complete the writing of this study : my parents for their unwavering love and belief in me as a human person ; my husband who gave me unflinchingly every opportunity to pursue my studies ; Dr. Isipom Olori, my adviser, who has helped me not only with the subject matter of this study but also taught me the proper technique of research and style ; Professor Leroy Olo-Yabari and Dr. Germina Yaptenco, my two readers for their interesting discussion and advice ; Dr. Helen Mendonsa, Chairman of the Department who has encouraged me to continue and prevail, the examiners, Professor Amelia B. Sison and Dr. Edwin Descente, who read the manuscript patiently and offered their comments and Lucy Mallare who typed the thesis with care and patience.

SHANTHA KALHINASWAMY

## ABSTRACT

This study attempts to place in a critical perspective the study of the woman in modern Indian fiction in English between 1950 and 1980, as reflected in the novels of six major writers : Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai and Ruth Praver Jhabvala. While attempting to determine the shifts in the general literary sensibility of the period towards the Indian woman in each author's work, the study directs attention on the woman's awakening consciousness and her confrontation against a male-dominated, tradition-oriented society.

Though the methods of delineation and attempts at interpretation vary in their complexity and also in accordance with the problematics of the individual author, the Indian woman emerges, at the end of the study, as a human person, essentially Indian in sensibility and likely to remain so in the near future. This is surprising when we recall the crumbling of traditional norms, the variations in taste and standards of judgment, the impact of Western culture and alien values, the post-Independence travails, and increasing economic and educational opportunities.

Raja Rao, taking shelter behind the Brahmanic culture he springs from, advocates through his women protagonists like Savithri, Shantha and Madeleine an intensely mystic and personal solution to the dilemma of the Indian woman. Bhattacharya presents her as the pure woman, victimised and yet the redeemer who creates harmony in life. These women are idyllic, tender hearted and gracious, tinged with an optimism that strengthens them to overcome their *Karma*.

R.K. Narayan reveals in a comic vein a wide variety of feminine temperaments in his fictive world. The transformation

of the female from the conventional meek Savithri into vibrant Rosie and Daisy gives Indian fiction and Indian womanhood newer and more vibrant role models to emulate. Daisy, in whom the high point of Indian feminism is reached, by means of her intelligence energy and volition, brings an altogether new balance of power between the sexes in sleepy Malgudi. She is likely to remain the pivotal point for studies on the woman in Indian fiction.

She is unique in that she is able to cast aside all culturally imposed feelings of guilt and shame on womanhood and sex. Narayan, however, in depriving her of personal fulfilment in marriage and domesticity, warns us about the excesses of rampant feminism which would lead to a destructive or deathlike androgynous blurring of the two sexes.

Kamala Markandaya points out how the emancipation of the Indian woman has been seriously hampered by the distortions and imbalances in the economic and social order. In Markandaya's recent novels, the Indian woman has evolved towards a larger concept of love—the sisterhood of man. The quest for feminine autonomy leads her to the nurturance of warm familial relationships, which in turn progresses towards imaginative sympathy for the human race.

Anita Desai explores the disturbed psyche of the modern Indian woman. Her women characters try to strike a balance between instinctual needs and intellectual aspirations. Deeply exhausted by this trapeze act, they are further bewildered when the existential absurdity of life is unmasked before them, when they face loneliness and lack of communication and communality and are finally brought to mental crises when masculine and institutional pressures are added to exacerbate them further.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala, the only writer who is foreign-born and bred in this study, finds life in India to be an overwhelming burden to European women; forced to live in India, they, like her, seek an escape by withdrawal and flight. A lot of potent human experience comes down to us when we read

about these female characters. They help in cultural identification, working out their dilemmas within the specific coordinates of a firmly created novel. The authors express through them their involvement with human development in Indian society.

The study shows us that the Indian woman—passive or aggressive, traditional or modern—serves to reflect the writer's sense of isolation, fear, bewilderment and emotional vulnerability. Often she is also made use of as the agent for the author's quest for psychological insight and awareness. She evokes a continuous discussion of social values, she is the focal point of contact between the writer's consciousness and the alien world, his experience of reality and his hope for salvation. As a symbol not only of growth, life and fertility, but also of withdrawal, regression, decay and death, she is a powerful figure indeed. As a protester against social and sexual inequalities and discrimination, she is seen to usher in the Novel of Dissent.

The awakening of the woman's consciousness establishes a new set of values in the fictive system. The typological experiences of these women have constant elements like an abrupt awakening, intense introspection, a stasis in time and action, and an abrupt ending with a conscious decision. The ending does not lead to a resolution of her problems, but the fictional shaping of a very specific kind of crisis seen through her eyes is rewarding, for it leads to inner enrichment, a sense of exhilaration and vicarious achievement as we see her battling through harsh reality.

The novels in this study are also seen as a spectrum presentation of the ways of dealing with the binary opposition of male *versus* female dominance, of woman as subject *versus* woman as object. All the options from girlhood through motherhood and manless life style are now open to her. *Equality* and *liberation* are the two operative words here. It is seen to be difficult for the woman to reconcile these concepts with the reality of her life, bent down as she is by the weight

There are no simple solutions anymore. The woman at the end of the novel does not usually make an imaginative escape into a larger life created independently of sex and boundless in joy and sympathy. Even those women who are more fortunate, with advantages of birth, wealth, education and opportunity, do not find a fully eventuated mature union with the opposite sex. The poor battle for survival and do not train their sights higher on equal job prospects, pay and sexual roles. When survival needs are met, they find they are confronted with other problems like loneliness and alienation.

Outdated and outmoded family and marriage laws, divorce, abortion, dowry, rape and inheritance rights are all weighted against her; older models have crumbled round the edges while new models like Daisy, Usha and Bimla have yet to establish themselves on a firmer footing. Most women in fiction, and in real life have to grapple with conflict situations. How far to conform, how to break away to assert one's individuality, how to overcome the sense of loss in rebellion, how to resolve the identity-crisis—these questions still remain to be answered.

The study shows us, however, that the Indian woman is resilient, and she emboldens the writer and reader alike to endure and prevail. The figure of the Indian woman—with her inner strength and integrity, paving her own resolute way through an exploitative, sexually discriminatory world—serves as an inspiring light of hope and endeavour.

## CHAPTER 1

# Introduction : "Bright Garland of the Three Worlds"

## The Woman in Indian Fiction in English : 1950-1980

*Let no one be born,  
But if one must  
Let no one be a girl.  
If one must be a girl  
Then may she never fall in love,  
If she must fall in love,  
Free her from her family.*

—Vidyapati  
(early 15th Century A.D.)

This is a study of the woman as presented in Indian Fiction in English between 1950 and 1980. It seeks to trace the continuities in the development of the movement of sensibility towards the woman as reflected in the novels of six major Indian authors in English—Raja Rao, Bhabani Bhattacharya, R.K. Narayan, Kamala Markandaya, R.P. Jhabvala and Anita Desai. Between them, these six writers cover the entire gamut of the woman's issue in India, in all its varying aspects, traditional and modern. While the triad of elder novelists, Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan and Bhabani Bhattacharya need no introduction, one cannot forget easily the sociological novels of Kamala Markandaya nor the Jane Austen type of novels with an urban setting that Ruth Praver Jhabvala excels in. Anita Desai is the youngest of the six writers chosen in this study. She has published six novels and two collections of short stories

so far; she is a member of the National Academy of Letters in Delhi and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in London. She is a winner of the Winifred Holtby Memorial prize, and the 1978 National Academy of Letters Award. She brings fresh insights to the dilemma of the Indian woman in her novels and she has to be included in any study dealing with women in Indian fiction. While eschewing all claims to be an exhaustive study, a conscious effort has been made to include all the novels written between 1959-80 which seemed deserving of critical consideration in the light of the topic chosen for study.

### **The Topic : Choice and Intent**

The woman has been the focus of many literary works in the period under scrutiny. The wide variety of the portrayals of women in Indian literature after Independence in 1947, coupled with the curious lack or absence of any systematic study of the general literary sensibility of the period towards the woman as compared with the numerous studies of women portrayed in Sanskrit Literature, have acted as signals for taking up this study.

It may be argued that the choice of the woman as the subject tends to be restrictive and lopsided in as much as the Indian woman is at worst an inferior expendable commodity and at best one of the many parts, muted often enough, that go to constitute the Indian social and political scene. In a land teeming with 640 million people it would seem more natural to treat of man, elemental, universal and/or archetypal than woman who constitutes almost half the population but a half that has been denuded of its self respect and subjected into a grim existence. Of what use is it to study a creature who as a child, is sold off to strangers for a bridal price or when she grows up, serves as a supplier of dowry for her husband's family or who, as a widow, in a final act of obliteration immolates herself on her dead husband's funeral pyre to be acclaimed as 'Sati Savitri', as an immortal?

One cannot, however, so easily ignore the Indian woman.

In an age of alienation, of growing intellectual crisis, even more so in a developing nation like India, the woman serves as a symbol, as a rallying point for the artist's dissatisfaction and disorientation with the *status quo*. There is no doubt the average Indian woman of to-day is a far cry from her Vedic ancestress, the *Nari*, the *Prakriti*, the graceful half of *Ardha-narceswara*, the winsome *Parvati*, the glowing *Ushas* and the awe-inspiring Mother *Kali*.<sup>1</sup> V.S. Naipul, criticizes the apathetic state of the Indians : "Siva has ceased to dance."<sup>2</sup> So has his consort.

The Indian women are now beginning to stir out of their placid stoicism. Arising political and social consciousness in a fertile milieu has brought them out into the open in protest marches against discrimination, dowry deaths, rape and exploitation. Novel after novel, when it treats of the Indian woman's consciousness turns into a novel of dissent. The age of the novel of consent has become extinct in India.

Albert Camus cites the Hindus and the Incas as incapable of rebellion.<sup>3</sup> His argument is that metaphysics having been replaced by myth in these two civilizations, all things are foreordained, and held sacred. The problem of rebellion does not arise for there are no more questions ; according to him, there are only eternal answers and commentaries. This would not apply under the present Indian context. Grammarians and their commentaries do not meet the pragmatic needs of the present day Indians, male and female. The woman in fiction often serves as the symbol of the seething discontent raging within the heart of the ordinary Indian.

The woman in the Indian novel now reflects the shift in the sensibility of the writer as well as the reader. She is no

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1. For a concise picture of the Vedic concept of woman, see Ananda Coomaraswamy. *The Dance of Shiva* (New York : Noonday Press, 1957), pp. 98-123.
  2. V.S. Naipaul *India : A Wounded Civilization* (London : Penguin, 1979), p. 45. The reference is to Coomaraswamy.
  3. Albert Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion and Death*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York : A.A. Knopf, 1961), pp. 102-103.



longer the paragon of virtue and chastity to be extolled by poets and priests and philosophers. She is the symbol of imagination, of sensibility itself, of nature arraigned *versus* the forces abroad actively denaturing humanity. She is the artist's expression of his awareness of the cumulative pressures of social experience. The venue of the identification between the author and the consciousness of woman lies in their tortuous and protracted adjustment and accommodation to the environment. The woman has now become the perfect image of the artist's insecurity. His isolation, fear, bewilderment, vulnerability and sense of acute violation potential and actual are all mirrored through her consciousness.

Often the Indian author seems to manipulate her as a means of escape from a tired culture—a culture that burdens him, a culture that seems incapable of regeneration.<sup>4</sup> The Indian woman in these novels is now a symbol of retreat, into personal regression and self pity, and now a symbol of growth, purity and development. As such she provides a fascinating glimpse into a hitherto scarcely known aspect of Indian fictive and social life. She seems to have emerged from the dark recesses of her *haveli* and from her *purdah* and befits a close study.

Though this study deals with only the writers in English, one cannot but be aware of the currents of change brought in by major writers in the 14 other languages of the sub-continent.<sup>5</sup> Here are a few outstanding writers in the regional languages who have won critical acclaim for their portrayals

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4. See Naipaul, p. 18. "The crisis of India is not only political or economic. The larger crisis is of a wounded old civilization that has at last become aware of its inadequacies and is without the intellectual means to move ahead."

5. See Meenakshi Mukherjee, *The Twice Born Fiction* (New Delhi : Arnold-Heinemann, 1971), p. 211. See also V. K. Gokak, *The Concept of Indian Literature* (New Delhi : Munshiram Manoharlal, 1979), p. 150. For surveys of literature in the regional languages see *Contemporary Indian Literature—A Symposium* (New Delhi : Sahitya Akademi, 1957) and N. Jotwani, ed. *Contemporary Indian Literature and Society* (New Delhi : Heritage, 1979).

of the contemporary Indian woman—in Assamese Hemien Borgchain, Padma Barkataki, Navakanta Barua and Uma-kanta Sarma; in Bengal we have Ashapurna Devi and her disciple Pratibha Bose with middle class life, its meanings and richness as the central theme, and the other major writers dealing with Marxist trends—N. Mitra, Natayana Sanyal, Bhaduri, Bimal Mitra and others; in Gujarati Shikumar Joshi has written about the generation gap in *Marichile* and the divorce problem in *Anang Reg*; there are a host of women writers here (Dhiruben Patel, Meenal Dixit to name a few) as in Kannada, Marathi and Tamil; in Hindi following the socio-political trend set by Prem Chand we have Nagar, Ashk Ajineya, Verma and Yashpal; Bendre and Ananthamurthy in Kannada; in Tamil after Pudumaipithan and Kalki, come Janakiraman whose *Mother Came* is incisive novel, and Jayakanthan—the list could be extended further. It is indicative of the fact that along with popular escapist fiction, there exist side by side, more serious fictive writing depicting the changing social scene and the change in the sensibility of the Indian woman. The greater part of the readership of these novels also falls among the women, not to forget the many female practitioners of the craft.

The question arises as to what end the study of literary heroines could be polarised. Such a study definitely helps in our task in cultural identification. We are given all the relevant particulars within the pages of a novel. It is through the confines of a novel that we see what it means to be an Indian woman to-day. In Western countries, the woman's issue is mostly one of identity, job equality and sexual freedom. In India, for the majority, it is a question of survival. The few who have escaped the vicious colonial cycle of ill-education and better opportunities also find themselves in a constant tussle with inevitable social mores with the conservative tradition behind. All talk of modernisation, self-expression, reproduction, polymorphism, perversion, or liberation, or burning the bra would be out of place and out of the Indian milieu.

term is generating a counter productive movement and in India as elsewhere, there are women alert and intelligent enough to choose not to be on any bandwagon. In India the issues are different. It is not a question of who brings in the bigger pay packet, who would do the dishes and change the nappies and who would wash the curtains and walk the dog. The priorities here are not the same as in the West. At each economic level, the problems are different. The problems for urban working women are as insuperable as those of the rural farm women. She is the last to be hired, rural or urban, and the first to be fired. While the urban educated woman can at least hope like Nora of *The Doll's House* to flee the coop, the rural woman has no viable solution to her phenomenal problems.

Madhu Trehan and Sunil Sethi explain :

Her own situation is so inextricably intertwined with her husband's economic condition, that questions such as why she is being paid half of her husband's salary for the same amount of work on a construction site or why she has to manage all the housework alone after working outside all day, become semantic—only to be considered as finer points in living.<sup>6</sup>

In such a milieu, what is of paramount importance is survival. The Indian woman seeks to be emancipated even though poor, independent though bound by affection, delivered from manipulation. In short, what is wanted by women everywhere—Indian or otherwise—is the same emancipation for the female as for the male. The aim is to be a whole human being, regardless of difference in sex, colour, religion, caste and country. It is, therefore, timely to redress the imbalances and take a close look at women created out of fact by fiction. The whole point of the fictive experience is that it shows a vicarious participation which frees us from the straitjackets of the natural kingdom (sex, race, age, etc.)<sup>7</sup>.

6. Madhu Trehan and Sunil Sethi, "Indian Women : A Time for Reckoning", *India To-day* (August 1-15, 1980), p. 33.

7. Even feminists of the Calibre of Simone de Beauvoir would seem to agree with the usefulness of such a study. How else to explain her

The novel though an importation from the West (bulk of Indian writing in English is in the novel form) has taken roots in the Indian soil. Here at least the Indians, male and female, might profitably examine their own images as given within the created compass of a novel, albeit in a male dominated society by writers, both male and female, of fiction. This is one realm where one feels one could explore for permanent values and not get bogged down by polemical fist swingings and the Settembrinian arguments about the ontology of sexuality. This fictive world while declining the burden of philosophical problems, is a peculiarly sensible way of revealing the Indian woman's nature, on grounds not primarily biological, psychological, economic, sociological or political but essentially literary, though the latter may, at times partake of the all these modes.

Here it is a question of the Indian woman defining herself by a set of relationships and modes of conduct within a created society. It is through her that the artist gives loving form to Indian life in general and through her we try to see reality. As such there is no need to involve ourselves with the dialectic of feminism here. The question of woman's superiority or inferiority to man is irrelevant. What is relevant is the modern Indian woman's effort to grapple with the particular, the concrete, the immediate. Acrimony on this subject has led to so many arguments and counter arguments, equally open ended and fallacious. Simone de Beauvoir rightly says : "If we are to gain understanding we must get out of these ruts ; we must discard the vague notions of superiority, inferiority and equality which have hitherto corrupted every discussion of the subject and start afresh."<sup>8</sup>

Limitations, however, are inherent in the picture. Krishna Ahooja Patel rightly points out :

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7 (Contd.)

incorporation of a Chapter on the woman as seen by certain writers, in an otherwise dense historiographical work. See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Middlesex : Penguin Books, 1972), p. 229. The Chapter is titled "The Myth of Women in Five Authors,"

8. De Beauvoir, p. 27.

Much of the current writing has tilted more towards examining the position of women in the urban and modernised sector of societies, concentrating on those who are already educated and employed and form a privileged minority in their countries. The very real problems of men and women whose backs are bent with hard work in rural areas and whose labour is frequently unrewarded have held the interest of only very few writers.<sup>9</sup>

The woman in India has formidable problems confronting her. Mao Tse-tung points out that as opposed to the three mountains that a Chinese man carried on his back, the Chinese woman had four on her shoulders: the colonial oppression from outside, the feudal oppression from within and his own backwardness. The fourth, for the woman, is the Chinese man.<sup>10</sup> The woman in India too has to shake off the four mountains on her back. She has to throw off the shackles of *Karma*, in action and self pity; she has to overcome the legacy of centuries old humiliation, dependence resignation and silence. The novel in India constitutes a rare region of enlightened lucidity wherein the Indian woman picks up enough courage to raise her head and ask a few awkward but pertinent questions. The responses would determine the shift towards new development strategies in the Indian social polity.

The need of the hour is to portray the Indian women as they are—shorn of all their mystery, poetry and romance. Though fettered by domestic injustice and tyrannical custom, they have been placed on pedestals and worshipped as goddesses (Shakti, Lakshmi, Kali, etc.) in literature history and society. Though commercialised in life, they have been romanticised in Sanskrit literature and lyrics. The classification of women into idealised stereotyped and eulogising them is a hall-

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9. Krishna Ahooja Patel, "Another Development for Women", in *Approaches and Strategies*, ed. Marc Nerfin (Uppsala The Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, 1977), p. 70.

10. Mao Tse-tung, "Women" in *Quotations from the Chairman* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1961), Chapter 31.

mark of Sanskrit literature.<sup>11</sup> The tendency persists in Indian literature even to-day. In the heyday of the classical period, the Indian woman was what the artists made her, expected of her and asked her to live up to. He defined himself through her—the Other as Simone de Beauvoir puts it. That she exists, the existential concept, being totally suppressed or kept in abeyance made it very difficult to define her. Hence all the mystery, the poetry and the romance. She is constantly likened to something or the other in the *kavyas*: a river, a rippling stream, a fragrance, a flower, a dream and what not ! The metaphorical vocabulary is fully in use to describe the Protean woman. Raja Rao trying to define the ideal Indian woman likens her to Mother Ganga (the river Ganges) and quotes extensively from Jagannatha Bhatta's lyric poem *Gangalahari* is his novel *The Serpent and the Rope* : <sup>12</sup>

Sole giver of pleasure to the young  
Centre of holy waters  
Bright garland of the three worlds.

The *nayikas* or the heroines have classic virtues. There is no hint at any deviation whatsoever as they pass through the different stages of life as girls, wives, mothers and later as widows.<sup>13</sup> After all Manu, the law giver had been explicit.<sup>14</sup>

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11. R. Dikshit, *Women in Sanskrit Dramas* (Delhi : M. Lachman Das, 1964); S. Jayal, *The Status of Women in the Epics* (Delhi : M. Banarsi Das, 1966); C. Kunhan Raja, *Survey of Sanskrit Literature* (Bombay : Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1962).

12. Raja Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope* (New Delhi : Orient, 1968), p. 178. Also de Beauvoir, pp. 15-18.

13. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 178.

14. Manu who lived about the 6th century, B.C., the famous codifier of Hindu laws. According to him, the woman, like lowest caste, the Shudras, must not perform any ritual before the sacrificial fire without her husband. He viewed her solely as subject mother and wife and these roles too were idealised. Manu says : "In childhood a woman must be subject to her father, in Youth to her husband and when her lord is dead, to her sons. A woman must never be independent"—quoted in *Status of Women in India. A Synopsis of the Report of the National Committee* (New Delhi : Indian Council of Social Science

The novel in the Western world focusses on the woman's ability to choose, while here the literary pushes the women from one set of non-choices to another, from father to husband to son in fixed cycles of their lives. The discussion about her selfhood or personality (on which the Western novel is so often centered) simply does not arise. "One might argue" says Meenakshi Mukherji, "that the classical ideals no longer obtain in the Indian context. But in actual literary practice, numerous characters are found to adhere to classic prototypes—especially the women of fiction who persistently re-enact the suffering, sacrificing, role of Sita or Savitri."<sup>15</sup> Such has been the influence of traditional literature in the portrayal of women.<sup>16</sup>

### Commitment to Religion and Ritual

Much has been said about religion (a distinction has to be made between ritualism and religious thought) and its cumulative influence on Indian women in literature and society.<sup>17</sup> Throughout Indian history, in subtle ways, the Indian woman's essential commitment to her religion and the institutions and rituals such commitment entails, has enabled her to be portrayed as the guardian of culture and religion. It is difficult to summarise the various images of women in Hinduism and Islam, the two dominant religions, through the ages. The women have been described as the embodiment of purity and spiritual power and respected as godly beings on the one hand

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15. Mukherjee, p. 29.

16. Though the *Mahabharata*, among the epics, forms a notable exception in portraying such variegated and forceful heroines as Kunti and Draupadi, who are by no means easy tumblers or trembling toadies. Generally, the dearth of female role models is appalling.

17. By religion, one normally assumes Hinduism, the religion of the majority in this study, unless otherwise specified. In Indian society one can find all the older religions of the world: Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Confucianism, forms of animism, Islam and Christianity with all their denominations. Religion-wise the general attitude in India has been to place women among the lowliest of the low in the hierarchical structure. See *Status of the Women in India. Report of ICSSR*, pp. 13-20.

and on the other, viewed as being essentially weak creatures constantly requiring the protection of man as their lord and master.

Rama Mehta, the Sociologist from Harvard University states :

There is a recorded evidence to show that the Hindu woman was not always without rights nor constantly in subjection. There is, however, greater evidence to show that the contrary was true ; for many centuries her position continued to be one in which she did not have either legal or social rights to make her independent of the family into which she was born or married.<sup>18</sup>

While the Vedic hymns extoll her as her husband's partner in all the rituals before the sacred fire, she is regarded in practice as impure and unfit to perform the higher religious functions such as that of being a priest. While the Koran placed woman in high esteem and gave them equal rights to property and education, in practice Muslim women in India are generally less educated and more vulnerable than their Hindu counterparts. They do not even have the comfort of entering a mosque.

Male dominance in the family as also in society led to the growth of customs and rituals that ensured the women's continued subjection. Marriage, the one religious sacrament in which she is allowed to participate is the summum bonum, the coveted career, the alliance between two families, not a free selection between two adult human beings. It is an indissoluble sacrament for her (not for her husband) blessed by religious rites in which she is not generally consulted.<sup>19</sup>

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18. Rama Mehta, *The Western-Educated Hindu Women* (Bombay : Asia Publishing House, 1970), p. 16.

19. For a fuller view of the Hindu marriage and what it involves, see V.M. Apte, *The Sacrament of Marriage in Hindu Society : From Vedic Period to Dharmasastras* (New Delhi : Ajanta International, 1978). Marriage and motherhood are considered essential for the salvation of woman. Minoo Masani relates in *Our Growing Human Family* the tale of Shubhru (from the *Mahabharatha*) a religious woman who idealised



Marriage for the Hindu woman is a partnership that extends beyond the husband's death. If widowed, through she may be a child, she is an insubstantial symbol who has to bear her form in penance in the light of her religious *Dharma*. No doubt many preferred immolation on the funeral pyre of their husbands as *Sati* to a lifetime of widowhood; The concept of *Potirata*, the complete devotion of the woman to her husband, alive or dead, is a concept the Hindu woman is brought up with. The society frowns upon any deviation from this moral code and hence widow remarriage has never been successfully implemented. *Potirata*, the code of charity is the dominant attitude of Indian women towards marriage in all sections of society.

The patriarchal joint-family system, the Caste, Sub-caste, Gotra of common descent restrictions, the prevalence of the dowry system, the curiagers and the matching of horoscopes and the complicated and elaborate rituals render marriage as a complex of obligations—religious, moral, social and economic. The Indian woman marries into a family, into a community. Once married she is expected to exorcise all personal ambitions and goals: she has to find her fulfilment in the family, not outside it. She is generally segregated from men and her social life is confined to the home, the temple and the company of women relatives. The *Purdah* system, according to Rama Mohan emanated from the feminine code of modesty, not as an imposition from man. But others demur: it has been viewed as another ingenious device akin to foot binding (China) and chastity belts (Europe) to keep women not only spiritually but also physically immobile.<sup>19</sup>

This is not to say everything ordained in the Vedas is

19. *Castles*

chastity. She learns on her deathbed that she may reach heaven unless her body is consecrated by the sacrament of marriage. This may sound arcane outside the Indian context but it reveals how certain traditional prejudices about women are deeply imbedded in the Indian psyche.

20. "The system of *purdah* is designed so cleverly that women are deprived of enjoying even free elements of nature such as fresh air and sunshine," say Patel, p. 69.

derogatory to women. Liberal education has never been denied to Indian women through the ages by law or by religion. Social prejudice combined with the enforcement of practices like early marriages, dowry, *purdah* and joint family system's obligations have kept them away from higher learning.<sup>21</sup> Summing up, one could say that, Hinduism not being an efficient proselytizing religion does not show systematic and efficient discrimination based solely on sex. The tapestry of the Indian woman's life, however, is generally woven dark with blotches of light here and there—rare cases of enlightenment.<sup>22</sup>

### Change in the Picture

With the turn of the century, came a host of social and political reformers like Raja Ram Mohun Roy and Mahatma Gandhi. All discrimination based on sex disappeared with the Independent Movement and the way of life of a whole generation changed radically. Added to this was the cumulative

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21. But the women who excelled in traditional and contemporary India, the women who were concrete examples of the pristine Vedic respect, sanction and status accorded to women seem to have been forgotten. The Rig Vedic poetesses, the female warriors, stateswomen and philosophers and mathematicians like Gargi, Maithreyi and Leclavathi might have never existed. The historic queens like Tara Bai of the Kakteyas, Ahalya Bai of the Holkars, Razia Begum, Rani Durgavati, Chand Bibi, Roopmati, Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi exist solely between the pages of the school textbooks. Contemporary achievers ranging from the freedom fighters, social reformers to writers, poetesses, and political leaders (Kasturba Gandhi, Irawathy Karve, Sarojini Naidu and of course Indira Gandhi to name a few) are arrayed time and again to prove the point that all is well with our world. This glorified picture tends to conceal rather than reveal the present truth.
  22. I have digressed at length on religion for it is such an integral part of the Indian fabric of living. For a fuller account of the religions and their value systems in India see Rama Mehta, Ananda Coomaraswamy, the ICSSR Report on the status of women in India, Dr. Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life* (New York : Macmillan, 1968); M. Hiriyanna, *The Essentials of Indian Philosophy* (London : Allen and Unwin, 1956); V.K. Gokak, *The Concept of Indian Literature* (New Delhi : Munishram Manoharlal, 1979); Chapter 10—"The Modern Indian Way of Life" and Chapter 12—"Western Thought and Modern Indian Aesthetics."

impact of the Indian influence is education, law, politics and social reform. The British took all "about equal" influence rights and the two laws have been influenced in the life history of the Indian woman.<sup>22</sup> How many of them might be taken as to be considered by her is actually not the question; but that is the law aspect. The fact that such rights were at least in part, is of great significance.

The impact of the West and its individualistic ideas made possible the emergence of some curious adaptation in Indian life and behaviour. The total application, however, of Western culture to the Indian woman has been neither feasible nor desirable. The major concern of the novelist in the West—her love, personal happiness, sex, the sexual triangle—does not have the same significance in an Indian milieu. The writer Mahipala Bhattacharya, Raju Rao and others point out again and again that the Indian social condition is different, that it precludes the similar development of "sexual concepts". One cannot accept the Western treatment of marital bliss (or sexual) as the case may be, rather than romantic love in the Indian novel. The joint family has, of course, provided a rich background of intense and complex human relationships. There are other non-white indigenous and uniquely Indian situations and characters in fiction—these show little or no visible sign of the East-West encounter.

The struggle for independence was one of the few aspects of an all India character in our times. It brought in the

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22. See *Status of Women in India*.
  23. The impact of the two cultures, the Indian and the Western, the consequences and the subsequent development in the post-Independence era are dealt with in Part 2, Chaudhury in his books: *The Shattering of an Immense India* (London: Macmillan, 1950); *The Continent of India: An Essay on the Politics of India* (Bombay: Jaico, 1955); *It Was or Not to Be* (New Delhi: Orient Books, 1970).
  24. In Sarita Khanna Rao's *Remember the House*, even the heroine is confronted by such a crisis in love and happiness. Her grandmother points out their impossibility in the Indian context. Other heroines like Kamilla in Anita Desai's *Tiger in the Snow*, Sarita in Raju Rao's *The Legend and the Rope*, Savitri in R.K. Narayan's *The Dark Room* find no easy resolution of the conflict between the two value systems.

train a host of pan Indian themes : the changing urban setting, the new rural scene, the disintegration of traditional values, and the comparison and evaluation of Western values *vis-a-vis* the indigeneous. Integration on a national scale led to greater coherence and maturity in the Indian novel. The period up to 1950 has been so profoundly touched by Gandhian ideals that no living writer could avoid writing about him and his impact on the masses. While most of the writers of this period were committed to national goals, some were content to be chroniclers or observers. K. Nagarajan, L L. Abbas, Mulk Raj Anand, Venu Chithale and the early novels of R.K. Narayan; Raja Rao and Markandaya belong to this period.<sup>26</sup> Critical scholarship that is extant covers this period in a fairly comprehensive manner. I have omitted this period not only to avoid being repetitive but also because the Indian woman emerges as a distinct, significant figure only in the post-Independence era.

The years between 1950 and 1980 have seen not only a prolific amount of writing but also a rapid decline of the values established during the Independence struggle. It is interesting to note that the decline of Gandhian values in the Indian political and social ethos has been reflected in fiction as well. "Hindu society which Gandhi had appeared to ennoble during the struggle for Independence had begun to disintegrate with the birth and growth that had come with Independence," says V.S. Naipaul.<sup>27</sup> The individual has now become a curious blend of native and borrowed elements—he tries to sift the elements by a deliberate turning inward with no hope of a resolution from an external agency. He is overwhelmed by the area of darkness within. Gandhian India had been swiftly created and as swiftly extinguished. "The old equilibrium had gone, and at the moment all was chaos." Continues Naipaul, "But out of this chaos, out of the crumbling of the old

26. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar's *Indo Anglian Literature* (Bombay : International Book House, 1943) and *Indian Writing in English* (Bombay : Asia Publishing House, 1966, reprint 1972) deals extensively with this period.

27. V.S. Naipaul, *India : A Wounded Civilization* (London : Penguin Books, 1979), p. 45.



*East and West*, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, and *The Times Literary Supplement*. Among the recently published surveys of the Indian novel in English, two that deserve to be singled out for praise are Meenakshi Mukherji's *The Twice Born Fiction* and S.C. Harvex's *The Fire and the Offering : The English Language Novel of India 1935-1970*.<sup>32</sup> Both are critically incisive and deal with themes, techniques and fruitful comparisons of authors and novels.

Curiously enough, hardly anything has been written on the woman in Indian fiction in English and this study attempts to fill the gap. Dorothy M. Spencer's *Indian Fiction in English* (1960) though an annotated bibliography, has a long introduction which observes critically the stereotypes of Indian fiction in general. She tries to speculate on the author's values and attitudes as revealed through the portrayal of stock characters like the farmer, the model husband, and the ideal woman. This is too sketchy for our purpose ; besides she is more concerned with the ethnographic and descriptive approaches than the purely literary.

There are a few critics who have written about the women writers of Indian fiction in English.<sup>33</sup> N. Meena Belliappa and C. Vimala Rao have written about the women writers in India ; they are useful and commendable in a pioneering kind of way. They indicate, however, the need for searching criticism in this area rather than fulfil it. They also tend to concentrate on the gender identity of the authors in question

rather than the women characters in fiction. One has to bear in mind that sex, skin race and country cannot be used as absolute philosophical concepts nor could they be determinants of artistic excellence. Paradoxically, quite a few male authors have been successful in portraying the woman's dilemma. We cannot forget Flaubert's *Emma*, Ibsen's *Nora*, Tagore's *Binodini* and Anand's *Gauri*. These female protagonists constitute a visible proof of the fact that biological differences do not stand in the way of artistic achievement.

Most critics when concerned with a study of women or women authors, tune into what they term 'a woman's point of view'. 'Point of view' is a concept which has been so much in use and abuse that it is at best only capable of a dubious definition in current critical parlance. It has meant to signify variously the Jamesian 'central consciousness' or 'the large lucid reflector', Lubbock's central intelligence and may apply equally to the intellectual orientation of a novel, to the emotional stance of the writer as reflected in his novel, and to the angle from which a fictional work is narrated: Questions about the point of view begin with technique and end with the novelist's entire view of life.<sup>34</sup>

If we differentiate between the male author's and the female author's point of view (the seeker and the sufferer as Jhabvala puts it) then we are imputing that the imagination can never rise above sex. Feminists more often than not do charge that no one in a male culture can objectify enough to project true womanhood. We are all contaminated by conditioning, "by minds diseased by the system" (Germaine Greer). If we accept this arbitrary differentiation, we tend to go back to the old Platonian and Aristotelian fallacies stretched onwards to St. Thomas and the Buddha which meet their deserved counterparts in such concepts as clonal reproduction and Goethe's cybernetic socialism.

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34. See Wayne C. Booth, "Distance and Point of View, An Essay in Classification" in *The Theory of the Novel*, ed. Philip Stevic (New York: The Free Press, 1967).

The intention, however, is to live our lives as given in the universe—not to do away with biology altogether. There is no need to invalidate the imaginative art ; fictive experience allows us a vicarious participation in the lives of the women in these novels. And we can live in fiction as another sex, in other skins, in other times. It is facile to transmute oneself into a captain Ahab or a meek Gauri. All that we need is a Shakespearean fellow feeling, a kind of faith in basic human nature, and the belief that in our ends lie our beginnings.

### **The Purpose of this Study**

Our culture is a male dominated one. Our models are male whether in India or in Europe or in America—and we cannot escape the fact that a female point of view has never truly existed and may not ever exist. Is it not then all the more informative to take a close look at these fictional heroines : girls, wives, mothers and widows, all who had the courage to confront the male created reality head on ?<sup>35</sup> They knew what it was to be a woman and true rebels in their individual ways, with a new sexual resonance they paved patterns of revolt against similar exploitative systems in the fictive world. Fiction helps us see the abundant depths of a woman's heart—as a mother, a lover, a victim and always a heroine. This study aims to put modern Indian womanhood—so complex and variegated—in a critical and fictional perspective.

The study purports to find out the general literary sensibility of the period towards women—whether there has been a casual or organic movement from novel to novel in each author, whether the author is carrying into his work merely a limiting or stock response to his own attitude towards womanhood,

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35. Although they were created by men. To suggest that no man (no woman either, to go by feminists like Germaine Greer, and Shilamuth Firestone) can bear true testimony to the feminine experience, would lead us to despair and the dialectic of despair has no place in literature at all. What we aspire is "full membership in the human race." Says Beauvoir, p. 29. Remember—writers like Bernard Shaw, Ibsen and Zola have sharpened our tools for us and hastened woman's emancipation.



whether he manipulates the issue to suit the necessities of his plot and technique or whether he genuinely tries to find a resolution and whether 'the differences' between male and female authors are really unbridgeable.

The study seeks to gain first hand glimpses, direct through the novels with no translation involved, the Hindu woman's adjustment to Western society and civilization and readjustment to the Asian, the consequent difficulties and pain in adjustments, readjustments and accommodation to a changing environment superimposed on a tired culture. It seeks to find out if the woman as the protagonist is passive or assertive in resolving the conflict between tradition and modernity, whether she is manipulated by the author as a symbol of romantic sensibility amidst simultaneous idealization and cruelty or as an agent in the author's quest for psychological insight and awareness.

The Indian woman exists among conditions often bordering on despair. The existential analysis operates at its best in these novels. Naipaul puts it in this way. "The world is illusion (*Maya*) the Hindus say. We talk of despair, but true despair lies too deep for formulation."<sup>36</sup> The study attempts at such a formulation. Educational attainments, participation rates, occupational structure, private and public laws, family planning systems, technological advance and above all socio-cultural attitudes are all weighted against the Indian woman. Yet as the anxious manager of home and culture she is on a ceaseless quest for a credible meaning to life, eternally seeking an intelligent purpose to living along with her male counterpart. It would be worth our while to find out how far do the women in the novels reflect the status of women in a society where the group is more highly esteemed than the individual (male or female) and the male more than the female and where role expectations are highly specific and institutionalised.

Given her complimentary role in fiction as well as in

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36. See Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness* (London: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 266.

society, these novels serve as indicators of the current potential of fictional creativity in India. Their purity of motive in exploding the Cinderella syndrome is an interesting phenomenon. The Indian woman has lifted up the Romantic polyanna patchwork of a purdah to take a hard look at society's injustices towards her. She now knows that in real life Cinderella does not get her prince, that life is never a rosy dream. Hence she reads about Madame Bovary, Jane Eyre, Anna Karenina, Gauri, Rukmani and Monisha and keeps her eyes open. She has to see the new dawn through her own eyes.



Rajam Iyer, Madhaviah and Chandu Menon were sensitive enough to note that the archetypal patterns evolving from a traditional bound culture were imposed willy nilly upon the Indian woman.<sup>3</sup>

These novelists discovered that the Indian woman could be a potent vehicle for an author who wishes to say something forcefully and has the talent to say it. They had discarded the nostalgic attitudes of the past and no longer indulged in the moral tales and the ephemeral fairy tale romances which were often too conscious of the reader. They tried to present neither a false focus on themselves nor an idealised image of their country and its people. Yet there was much scope for development in the portrayal of women characters. The procession of heroines, however, realistically portrayed, in their meek suffering and forbearance exemplified at best the contemporary Indian society's values rooted as ever in tradition.

As Meenakshi Mukherjee points out, in *The Twice Born Fiction*<sup>4</sup> the writers took their cue not from *Mahabharata* with its profound and disturbing treatment of evil but from the *Ramayana* with its literary archetypes like the ideal king, the ideal brother, the ideal woman and so on. It is only in the last twenty five years or so that the younger writers are using symbols from the *Mahabharata* with intriguing results. In the early decades of this century, the mythic ideal had yet to be differentiated sharply enough from the real Indian woman. The mythic pattern of a meek and submissive Sita or Savitri or Nalayani suffering patiently under a man made yoke had yet to be broken.

### **Tagore's Binodini, the Forerunner**

Many complex and realistic women characters were created by talented writers like Prem Chand, V.S. Khandekar, N.S.

3. K.S. Ramamurthi, "The Rise of the [Novel in India and the Rise of the English Novel]", in *English and India* eds. M. Manuel and K. Ayyappa Panicker (Bombay : Macmillan, 1978), p. 99.

4. Meenakshi Mukherjee, *The Twice Born Fiction* (New Delhi : Arnold Heinemann, 1974), p. 161.

Phadke, Venkatramani and Sarat Chandra, in English as well as the vernacular languages. Among these, it is Rabindranath Tagore's *Binodini* who stands out as the most convincing and full blooded Indian woman. She is the main protagonist in *Binodini*, published in Bengali in 1902 as *Chokker Bali*. She is undeniably a forerunner of the doomed female of modern India. She is portrayed in an unique manner—she is neither merely imitative nor exotic nor mythic. She is the every-woman of the Indian village who, however, hard she tries to rise out of the slime like a lotus flower, is relentlessly ploughed back into the mire.

*Binodini* sums up the author's ironic acceptance of the orthodox Hindu tenets of his day. As an unmarried girl is a social disgrace to a respectable Hindu family, *Binodini*, educated, beautiful talented but without a dowry, is married off in panic by her parents to an old sickly man who dies soon after leaving her widow struck in an unsympathetic village. Conscious of her beauty, intelligence and youth, she rebels against the harsh unjust tenets of orthodox Hinduism. She fights a lone protracted battle for her right to love and happiness. In the process she very nearly destroys another home.

However, she retires voluntarily, in the nick of time not because of the external social pressure but because of her own sense of innate dignity which would not let her stoop and acquiesce in a sordid victory acquired at the cost of another woman's happiness. 'Here tragedy', says Krishna Kripalani, "is a lasting shame to the Hindu conscience."<sup>5</sup>

Tagore has expressed the conflicting pressures of love, sex, kinship, religion and traditional ties with artistic sympathy in this novel. He, however, stops short of exploding the Sita myth. Woman, the Indian woman is doomed to suffer forever like her ancestor Sita of the Ramayana. *Binodini* is too sensitive to confront the climactic point, the point of no return, the

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5. Rabindranath Tagore, *Binodini*, trans. Krishna Kripalani (Honolulu ; East West Centre, 1964).

point at which the gentle cow like Indian female protagonist gets transformed into a vibrant heroine with an indomitable will of her own. All she could do was muster enough courage to tell her beloved Bihari : "I shall pray and do penance that I may have you as mine in our next life. In this life, I dare not hope for more ; I do not deserve it."<sup>6</sup> The Hindu belief in the inexorable order of *Dharma*, the inevitability of *Karma*, the negation of happiness and the illusory nature of life are stressed in the novel.

### Mulk Raj Anand and Gauri

During the thirties and forties India lay under the spell of political and social reformers like Mahatma Gandhi and Raja Ram Mohun Roy. New religious movements like the Arya Samaj and the Brahmo Samaj sprang up. For a while all discrimination based on sex disappeared from view in Indian life and literature. During the Post-Independence Era, after 1947, the issue crops up again, this time with renewed vigour in a changed political and social milieu. It is Anand who takes up the cudgel on behalf of the Indian woman whom he labels 'the poorest of the poor'.

In so many novels starting from 1935 onwards he has portrayed with documentary realism the evils of British imperialism and the cruelties inflicted on the masses in the name of Hinduism. With the committed fervour of a social reformer, with a deep feeling for the deprived, he reveals the hideous actualities of sweepers and coolies and plantation workers and also the Indian women. Though written later in a novelistic career that spans 45 years, *The Old Woman and the Cow*<sup>7</sup> has an interesting female protagonist. Gauri is "the modern Mother India" says S.C. Harrex.<sup>8</sup>

6. Tagore, *Binodini*, p. 243.

7. Mulk Raj Anand, *The Old Woman and the Cow*, (New Delhi: Orient, 1976).

8. S.C. Harrex, *The Fire and the Offering, The English Language in India 1933-1970*, Vol. 2 (Calcutta : Writers' Workshop, 1971).

Shanti breaks away from the established pattern of social roles and former bonds. As a wife and she had been subject of Dr. Pandit, her husband in the standard Hindu charges of indiscreetness and immorality. She acquires enough self-respect to make her stand in the town towards the husband of the humiliated Dr. Mahendran. The Pandit, who now stands before her in the shape of a degraded and miserable loneliness.

The story in brief narrates the growth of Shanti the person who grows from a domestic slave to a woman who stands on her own feet. Her mother's story is told to her by her own mother as a confession of an old merchantry. "But the sole grounds the mother extracts her now from the government's clutches.

John M. Vaidya shows us how Shanti, the simple unlettered girl, grows up to a competent nurse and midwife under the guidance of the Hindu doctor who shelters her. She is thus able to stand on her own feet and defy domestic injustice and communal racism. The victim has now been converted the ruling and polemical stand on issues. The girl has been found guilty with as being too simplistic the story as being too pamphleteering and idealistic. Nevertheless the novel is important from the point of view of understanding the sensibility towards women in Indian fiction. The ideal man-woman relationship as the dominant male and submissive female union has been improved as they met the Indian people that Shanti's questioning of the caste system comes as a first breath of life.

The quality of Shanti's courage show her sure of herself, her direction, the will, ethics. The indefatigable Hindu order which venerates the cow and ill treats the gentle cow like Shanti, the mother analogues of the sacred cow and of Shanti in Bengali are unforgettable. G. B. Sankar Das has said "This novel is unique among Indian novels in rejecting rather than accepting the time honoured womanly virtues of gentleness and submission."<sup>5</sup>

Gauri like Sita of *Ramayana* has to bring forth her husband's child in exile. This modern day Sita, however, does not wilt. She marches off towards a future, however, hazardous with a quiet confidence, determined to provide a better future for the child she carries in her womb.<sup>10</sup>

### **Balachandra Rajan : Alienation and Quest for Identity**

B. Rajan is another important writer whose contribution to the study of women in Indian fiction is significant enough to be mentioned here. He is pioneering novelist in the sense that he was among the earliest to shift his interest to psychological novels showing an introspective concern with the individual. He tries to eschew sentimental chauvinism and neurotic negation and aims to bring about a reintegration of human being, a revaluation of all values.

Rajan, a distinguished critic has but written two novels—*The Dark Dancer* and *Too Long in the West*.<sup>11</sup> *The Dark Dancer* is a deep intense work, the product of an Eliotisque imagination giving us much room for thought. It deals with the protagonist Krishnan's alienation and his attempt to synthesise conflicting systems of thought. On the one hand we have his arranged marriage to Kamala. It signifies the pull of tradition, the sense of conformity. On the other hand we have Cynthia Bainbridge, his English girl friend from Cambridge; she is the symbol of the new spirit from the West, the symbol of rebellion against custom and traditional authority.

S.C. Harrex asks : "Who is to be Krishnan's bridge of understanding? Eve Cynteia, the body beautiful or Saint Theresa Kamala?"<sup>12</sup> Kamala is the archetypal image of doomed Indian womanhood. She loses her life in the Hindu Muslim riots at Shantipur on the eve of the partition of individ-  
ed India into India and Pakistan. Similar to host of heroines

10. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, M. E. Derrett, Paul C. Verghese and Meenakshi Mukherjee have written extensive critiques on this novel.

11. Balachandra Rajan, *The Dark Dancer* (New Delhi : Arnold-Heinemann, 1958) ; *Too Long in the West* (London : William Heinemann, 1961).

12. Harrex, p. 190.



like Kusum in Nayantara Saigal's *A Time To Be Happy*, Savithri in Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* and Premala in Markandaya's *Some Inner Fury*, Kamala here is the typical Hindu woman who believes in abiding by one's *Dharma* as the way to salvation and happiness.

Critics like Meenakshi Mukherjee have charged that Kamala conforms too closely to the mythic ideal of suffering Indian womanhood leading the way for the salvation of the Indian male, to be convincingly real. Perhaps she is less of a free agent than other female protagonists in contemporary novels in India and is the victim of forces beyond her control. Nevertheless hers is a very vivid portrayal in a group oriented male dominated society. She fulfils unflinchingly her specific and highly institutionalised role as the strict orthodox Hindu Brahmin wife. She is a stepping stone to our understanding of such women who constitute a large part of contemporary Indian fictional output.

Kamala and Cynthia are more representative than individualistic in their function. They are representatives of the conflicting polarities of traditional and modernity, the East and the West, society and the individual, leading the author to a fiction of dissent. To deal with such opposites is to walk on dangerous and difficult grounds for such abstractions whether in fiction or in life, more so in fiction, could never be categorical and could never obscure or stratify the particular and the concrete realisation of human experience.

All these conflicting loyalties point out that there is no hope of an easy resolution—neither through marriage nor through an affair nor through death. There is no such thing as the perfect union of the fire and the rose, the *purusha* (male) and the *prakriti* (female). What we have is the hobson's choice of impotence, Cynthia or martyrdom, Kamala.

Cynthia's assessment of Krishnan is accurate: "You would always be torn between conflicting loyalties."<sup>29</sup> Krishnan predictably displays the Indian male's predilection for running

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13. Rajan, *The Dark Dancer*, p. 174.

away from reality. He lets himself be decided upon, first by his family, later by his friends and then Cynthia. It is left to Kamala, the metaphysical heroine to lead him to self discovery. She shows him the strength that lies in acceptance and belonging. In the process, her own dance with death, like the cosmic dancer's, leads her to death and destruction. The pattern of the saved male and the doomed female is repetitive indeed.<sup>14</sup>

The attempt to synthesise conflicting systems of values is pursued further, although in a sunnier vein, in *Too Long in the West*. What has ended abruptly with Kamala's death is taken up by Nalini the heroine of this novel. Nalini is a clear eyed South Indian girl fresh from Columbia, who comes back to Mudalur, an obscure little village tucked away amidst hills in the deep south. She tries to effect a rapprochement between the values of an open society with traditional village life, often with hilarious results.

Her father tries to find a perfect match for her. He chooses advertising in the papers over the conjunction of stars and the right of predigree. She is advertised for marriage : "Vadama girl, educated yet domesticated ; fair of face, ravishing of form ; unprecedented paragon, will marry whoever deserves her."<sup>15</sup> She is exhibited before a miscellaneous collection of odd suitors in parody of a *swayamvara*, the ceremony of choosing the bridegroom by the bride. She hangs her garland on the neck of Raman, a barber ear-piercer-cum-half baked local revolutionary and settles down in Mudalur.

The word 'vadama' in the advertisement signifies a particular sect among the Brahmmins. Intermarriage not only among the castes but also between the sects is usually prohibited. We also note the emphasis on 'fair of face'. Nirad C. Chaudhuri points out how the modern Hindus are obsessed with a fair complexion. They cannot see any beauty in a person who is

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14. Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization* (New York : Pantheon, 1946), pp. 35-53.

15. Rajan, *Too Long in the West*, p. 23.

not fair. He states that the ancient Hindus were free from this inhibition.<sup>16</sup>

Nalini though portrayed with affection and humour is not delineated sharply enough. At novel's end we leave her, trying to rule her mad cap husband and her equally muddled village. Perhaps the author has laced his story with too heavy a dose of fantasy to develop fully either the tragic or the comic possibilities.

He laughs at the quirks and peculiarities of the main characters so consistently that we suspect whether he really cares about Nalini's dilemma. Yet one cannot deny that she is used by Rajan to exorcise harsh reality with gentle irony, however, unreal the setting may be.

### **Raja Rao, The Man and His Work**

Raja Rao was born in Mysore in 1909 in an old Brahmin family which forms a link in the great chain of tradition for Raja Rao proudly traces back his roots to Madhavacharya and still further back to Yajnavalkya whom he quotes frequently. Together with Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan, he forms a remarkable triad of elder novelists. He is, however, not at all politically committed like Anand nor is he like R.K. Narayan. He is poetic, metaphysical and most critics label him as Lawrencean.

He is not a prolific writer. His earliest collection of short stories, *The Cow of the Barricades* appeared in 1947. *Kanthapura*, the first full length novel was written in 1938. The next novel *The Serpent and the Rope* appeared in 1960. As he himself observed, he felt lost and alienated and wandered around for many years before retracing his roots and identity, thanks to the help of his guru, Sri Atmananda.<sup>17</sup> *The Cat and Shakespeare* was published in 1965 and *Comrade Kirillov* in 1976. His

16. Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *The Continent of Circe* (Bombay : Jaico, 1965), p. 72.

17. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English* (Bombay : Asia Publishing House, 1972), p. 408.

next novel almost ready for publication is said to be dealing with the spiritual encounters between India and America and entitled *The Chessmaster and His Moves*. He is also said to be writing a novel centered around the Ganges and her seven sisters which should be very interesting when published, from the viewpoint of this study.

His collection of short stories contain thumbnail sketches of the remarkably patient and doomed Indian womanhood which he later expanded in his novels. In *Javni* we have a loyal domestic servant, "good like a cow", accepting her lot in life and serving her penance as a widow with devotion and love towards her employer. In *Akkayya* we have another typical example of self-effacing Indian womanhood. This time it is the high born widow who, denied a natural fulfilment of her desires as wife and mother in life, finds in silent unacknowledged heroism and ceaseless sacrifice, a meaning to her own existence.

Akkayya is a cook-cum-nursemaid-cum-grandmother to a host of orphaned children in the joint family, treating them all alike like a gentle cow. She is the forerunner of the gentle aunt Lakshamma and Little Mother in *The Serpent and the Rope*. She has touches of the motherly Shanthia in *The Cat and Shakespeare* too.

In the story *The Client* we find the protagonist Ramu, like a host of other young men in contemporary Indian fiction and life, being railroaded into an arranged marriage despite his objections to it. Raja Rao shows us here how strong the centuries-old conditioning process is and how difficult it is to resist its pull.

The title story *The Cow of the Barricades* epitomises Gauri, the sacred cow who fights the red man with non-violence. She is Kamadhenu, the cow of plenty ; she is Mother India, she is Mother love and compassion. She is the Mother principle subsequently evoked in *The Serpent and the Rope* and around which *The Cat and Shakespeare* is built. It is also noteworthy

how recurrent symbols like the cow, mother and Gauri the sacred wife of Shiva are linked. Rama in *The Serpent and the Rope* states : "What wonderful animals these be in our sacred land—such maternal and ancient looks they have. One can understand why we worship them."<sup>18</sup>

The worship of the cow goes back to the remotest memories of the Indian race. Perhaps the secret lies in the deep rooted affection the Aryans had for the cow. Aditi, the mother of the gods is described both as the cow and the mother—"The Supreme Light" whence all radiances proceed.<sup>19</sup>

### Kanthapura, The First Novel

*Kanthapura* is a fusion, as Paul Verghese points out, of poetry politics, religion and social reform.<sup>20</sup> It deals with the struggle for independence in a small village seen through the eyes of a grandmother. Men and women of all castes merge into the movement and sex does not enter the picture as a differentiating factor. Besides, there are many characters like figures in a tapestry ; it is difficult to pick out the individual rather than the observed types, male and female. There is more of external description and detail of milieu, more of action than psychological reflection ; the plot moves with an objectivity which is to be expected from a philosopher-cum-student of historical sciences.

A few of the characters stand out in the tapestry of village life in *Kanthapura*. We cannot forget Moorthi of the Corner House, "going through life like a noble cow", Ratna, the child widow whose romantic link with Moorthi is submerged in the struggle for Independence, the policeman Bade Khan symbolising brute power, Waterfall Venkamma the opportunist, Bhatta the money lender ; Narasamma, the pious old mother who chooses to breathe her last on her son being excom-

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18. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 25.

19. Srinivasa Iyengar, p. 389.

20. Paul, C. Verghese, *Problems of the Indian Creative Writer in English* (Bombay : Somaiya, 1971), p. 144.

municated. These are mini sketches vividly etched. They are expanded and reaffirmed in his later novels.

### **The Serpent and the Rope : The Genesis**

*The Serpent and the Rope* is one of the most extensively reviewed novels in contemporary Indian fiction. That his novels have intense autobiographical touches is borne out by what he says in this novel :

...all books are autobiographies. . .all have a beginning in the man who wrote the book, have absorbed his nights. They all represent a bit of oneself and for those who can read rightly, the whole of oneself.<sup>21</sup>

Yet Ramaswamy who relates "the sad and uneven chronicle of a life, my life" in *The Serpent and the Rope* is not to be identified completely with his creator. He is a fully realised fictional character and the novel is the story of the quest of Ramaswamy and the women whose lives are interwoven with his

The story begins with a poignant description of how he lost his own mother early in his life. He had to perform her funeral ceremonies, year after year, his father having married again. "So with wet cloth and an empty stomach, with devotion and sandal paste on my forehead I fell before the rice balls of my mother and I sobbed. I was born an orphan and have remained one."<sup>22</sup>

His father marries a second and a third time, the second wife leaving three girls Kapila, Saroja and Sukumari. The third wife is Little Mother widowed at twenty one with a baby son, Sridhara. Rama as the eldest male child in the family has enough responsibility. Little Mother is motherhood personified with her affection towards all the children in the joint family. Rama is an equally devoted son to her. He takes her to Benares to immerse the ashes of his father in the Ganges. The loss of a loved one and the transient nature of

Raja Rao like most Indians, regards maternity as the most sacred of earthly manifestations. For him, the pregnant woman is auspicious, as in *The Cat and Shakespeare*, he says: "I envy woman who can give birth."<sup>23</sup> It is the mother who takes upon herself the task of the continuity of racial life, of vitality. It is she who creates order in society and it is motherhood which makes the sacrament of marriage holy, indissoluble and continuous. Rama in *The Serpent and the Rope* regards Madeleine's pregnancy with awe. He senses something splendrous, mysterious in her: "She was not mine, maternity had given her an otherness—she seemed secretive, whole, incommunicable."<sup>24</sup>

Little Mother is synonymous with motherhood so much that she is not given a separate name. She like Aunt Lakshamma or Akkappa is mother to everybody in the joint family. When she married Rama's father and entered his household as his third wife, she knew what she was getting into. Her study of the Shastras, the Vedic scriptures had prepared her for her role in life. In the words of Manu, the law giver: "To be mothers were women created and to be fathersmen."<sup>25</sup>

Since there is no room for self deception there is no cause for disappointment either. To be a wife and a mother like Sita in the Ramayana is the aim. Little Mother does not seek to express her individuality or to get into the troubled waters of ego assertion. It can be said that she had learnt the meaning of acceptance that Kamala in *The Dark Dancer* so valiantly tried to bring to Krishnan. May be Raja Rao wishes to show us that the modern woman, Eastern and Western, Madeleine or Saroja is troubled for she cannot identify herself with a set of traditional values without questioning, without inward doubting. The type of unconscious implicit faith in tradition and religion that Little Mother has, cannot in any case be

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23. Rao, *The Cat and Shakespeare*, p. 92. Also *The Serpent and the Rope*, pp. 66, 235.

24. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 235.

25. Ananda Coomaraswamy, "Status of Indian Women" in *The Dance of Shiva* (New York: Noonday, 1957), p. 103.

expected in a person who is exposed to cross-cultural patterns and conflicts. Savithri and Saroja constantly try to abide by the ideals of the Hindu cultural milieu they were born into and feel they are misfits.

The mother-son relationship is a close and intricately interwoven one. We see it in the life of the pious orthodox mother of Moorthy in *Kanthapura*. The intensity with which Hindu communal mores are felt and practised is visible in the excommunication of the Gandhian Moorthy. His mother torn between her love for her son and the pressure of orthodox communal mores comes to a lonely and desolate end.

Despite the incongruity of age, Little Mother is mother to Rama in more ways than one and like the typical mother in *Manushastra* (Manu's laws), looks up to him as head of the family, now that his father is no more. Despite her apparent simple unlettered ways she has an innate sense of the wisdom of her ancestors and a quiet dignity that inspires affection and respect not only from youngsters but also from elders in the family like Uncle Seetharamu.

Steeped in Indian tradition, Raja Rao's approach is that of a Vedantin. Motherhood is a specialised role in itself and like marriage, like life, like everything else, it too is based on the impersonal principle. What matters is not the individual but the role allotted to him in life. Madeleine states in her letter to Rama : "I bore him, your son, with such love, for he was a child of love ; but you were more interested in his sonship than in his being my son. The feminine to the Indian must always be accessory, a side issue."<sup>26</sup>

Thus it is not Rama as such that counts but his role as a husband, as a brother. Similarly to Little Mother, happiness consists in fulfilling her vocation as a mother. Marriage is a social and ethical relationship and bringing up children is a payment of a debt to society. Ultimately if life and death are non-events in a mayic philosophy, so is marriage. Raja Rao

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26. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 36.



says : "All you see is seeming otherness. Ultimately nothing has happened or will happen and therefore, life is just a *lila*, a play."<sup>27</sup>

Little Mother too is impersonal—we do not know or need to know her name. She is mother to everybody in the joint family. Her entire life is based on the role expectation that society demands be fulfilled and specialisation as a mother leaves her little time for ought else. The influence of the mother like Kaikeyi and Kausalya in *Ramayana* and Kunti in *Mahabharata* is pervasive in Raja Rao's fiction. The mother's role as the inheritor and preserver of culture and racial stability is affirmed again and again. Rama aptly compares her to the Ganges : "The Ganges alone seemed to carry a meaning and I could not understand what she said. She seemed like Little Mother, so grave and full of inward sound."<sup>28</sup>

### **Madeleine and her Marriage**

One wonders whether Madeleine the French girl who marries Rama could ever share in the Little Mother's impersonal, unconscious and wholesale identification with a traditional set of values. Rama meets her while they were co-students at the University of Caen and marries her four years later. The marriage seems to flourish and prosper in an intellectual and academic atmosphere what with her being a professor at a college in the south of France and he trying to finish a thesis on the Albigenian heresy.

Aware of the differences in the epistemologies they represent, aware of their respective Indianness and Frenchness, Rama and Madeleine attempt a synthesis of the values of the dissimilar traditions they have sprung from. They try to give a double identity, natural and cultural, to themselves and to their son Pierre Krishna. Rama, like his creator, is equally at home in the East and the West, by his education, upbringing and places

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27. S.V.V. "Raja Rao, Face to Face" in *The Illustrated Weekly of India* (January, 1964), p. 45.

28. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 33.

of residence. As a Vedantic he is assimilative by nature demonstrating the need to see human culture as a whole. "I was too much of a Brahmin to be unfamiliar with anything", he says.<sup>29</sup>

Rama is working on the Cathars and traces their roots to Buddhism and Brahminism. He is interested in the Holy Grail and the sanctuaries of the Virgin all over the Mediterranean and he delves deep into French Medieval History. He is more French in some ways than Madeleine. He is able to accommodate her bourgeois relatives effortlessly unlike her. Given his Vedantic outlook on life, there is no fear that the hackneyed and much vaunted confrontation between the East and West should ever arise.

Madeleine on her part tries her best to understand his Brahmin precepts. She takes in her stride his bouts of heavy seriousness and childlike simplicity, his veering from one extreme to the other, from unbridled sensuality to inordinate ascetism, from exquisite sainthood to callous irresponsibility. His entries in his diary show us the Hindu tendency to be abstract 'meme entre les biasers' as Coomaraswamy puts it.<sup>30</sup>

The contrasts and the complexities evolving from a temperament shaped by Sanskrit, French and Indian metaphysics and an inherited system of entangled social and religious ties make our efforts at effective comprehension of the whole fictive system seem insuperable. What he portrays is not faith or freedom in the usual sense but an introspective way of life, a monistic vision anchored in a central mythic structure to comprehend it fully, one needs to belong, to be part of that evocative tradition.<sup>31</sup>

This is totally opposed to Madeleine's assertive, pragmatic and dualistic bent of mind. Yet she tries her best to adjust to her Vedantin of a husband with his quirks, his ineptness at

29. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 19.

30. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, pp. 158-159. Also Coomaraswamy, p. 165.

31. C.D. Narasimhaih, "Raja Rao : *The Serpent and the Rope*", in *The Literary Criterion* (Summer 1963), p. 78.

facing reality, his running away from decisions and from responsibility, his vegetarianism and his tubercular condition. Their marriage begins on a basis of profound friendship transcending racial, sexual and cultural barriers. Just as he feels quite at home with Marie de France and Baudelaire, and at the chapel at Montpalais as well as the Cathedral at Auch, Madeleine shares in his Hindu games of make believe and gives votive offerings to the rock elephant on the hill and to Nandi the bull at the door of the villa St. Anne.

There is no reason why marriage between two such educated emancipated human beings should fail. Yet fail it does. Pierre Krishna dies, another child is still born and slowly, inexorably they drift their separate ways. There is no acrimony, no rancour as they drift out of each other's orbit. Their mutual spiritual attainment is thwarted. She seeks the hard exclusive life of the Buddhist nun. Rama seeks to come back to India and endeavours to find new meaning to his existence under the guidance of his guru in Travancore. Their marriage as a means of mutual salvation is ended forever.

Madeleine asks : "What is it that separated us, Rama ?"

"India."

"India ? But I am a Buddhist."

"That is why Buddhism left India. India is impotoyable."<sup>32</sup>

India indeed is impotoyable and he carries his Kashi, his Ganga, his India within him, everywhere. India for him is not a physical or geographical entity—it is, as he tells us "an idea, a metaphysic". Unlike the stock protagonis who is tossed hither and thither by inter-cultural tension, Rama is a stitaprajna, a steadfast Brahmin while it is Madeleine who suffers from cross cultural conflicts. She finds it harder and harder to identify with all that stands for India in Rama.

Rama, true to his Brahminical nature is impersonal and abstract. Madeleine says : "I wondered whether I could

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32. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 331.

really love you—whether anyone could love a thing so abstract as you. I wonder if Indians can love.”<sup>33</sup> Here is Rama musing on the banks of the Ganges at Benares : “Did I love the self in Madeleine ? I knew I did not. I knew I could not love.”<sup>34</sup> Rama quotes the sage Yagravalkya often : “The husband does not love the wife for the wife’s sake, the husband loves the wife for the sake of the self in her.”<sup>35</sup>

Love, filial, conjugal, paternal and maternal is seen for what it is—as Maya. Rama finds strength and courage in the conviction that fits into a time ordained familiar pattern. Madeleine is more adventurous, and individualistic. She is on a quest for self-discovery, for her own sake, not for her husband’s. She does not need a mediator to reach her God nor does she feel she ought to be a medium to enable her husband to reach *Moksa*. Not for her the Vedantic concepts that Rama believes in and that Savithri so intuitively understands and immediately accepts.

Here are a few concepts that Rama believes in and that Madeleine rejects : that the God of woman must be the God of her man ; that to be a woman is to be absorbed by a man ; that the union of the male and female is proof that Truth is non dual ; that the wife approaches the husband and *vice versa* not so much as an individual person but as a divine principle ; to be a woman is to suffer, to bear the yoke of man ; that the woman enables man to see the self as the only reality ; that the seeming (serpent) must not be mistaken for reality (the rope) ; that the Hindus are right : Man must lead woman to the altar of God.<sup>36</sup>

Savithri states succinctly : “No woman who is a woman can choose her destiny. Men make her destiny. For a woman to choose is to betray her biology”.<sup>37</sup> Yet Rama speaks of Savithri

33. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 42.

34. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 26.

35. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 171.

36. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, pp. 111, 133, 170-71, 187, 291.

37. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 291.

in these terms : "She became the awareness behind my awareness, the leap of my understanding. I lost the world and she became it."<sup>38</sup> The relationship between the *purusha* and the *prakriti* is a web of interdependence. Madeleine recognises no interdependence of the sexes. She seeks truth on her own terms.

Her severe practices such as night vigils, non-stop prayers and fasting do not lead her to an identification of values with those of her husband's. Her ways as a Buddhist estrange her further from Rama who does not starve the flesh beyond resorting to his habitual and effortless vegetarianism. Unlike Madeleine, the Indian woman identifies the Brahman or the self with her husband who in turn is dependent upon her as the primal universal power for the fuller realisation of the self within him. Not achievement but self-recognition is of prime significance here. Perry D. Westbrook says : "Madeleine in her adoption of Buddhism independently of her husband was mistakenly seeing the rope (truth) as a serpent (delusion ; in this case the fact that her religion was purely a private matter)...As a means of salvation her marriage was already dead to her."<sup>39</sup>

As the title suggests it is a question of a choice between two ways of apprehending reality—the recognition of the object as object and the recognition that the object exists because the perceiver perceives it. Madeleine and Rama represent the confrontation of these two modes. Raja Rao does not indicate any preference for one over the other. The resolution, if any, is left to the reader. As Meenakshi Mukherjee says : "With admirable restraint Raja Rao has steered clear of the facile solution of concocting an easy assimilation of the two cultures."<sup>40</sup> The marriage which has long ceased to exist is legally and irrevocably ended when Rama signs the divorce papers in the office

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38. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 169.

39. Perry D. Westbrook, "Theme and Inaction in Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*," in *World Literature Written in English* (November, 1975), p. 391.

40. Mukherjee, p. 94.

of a shabby Parisian notaire. It is an anticlimactic end to a marriage from which the partners had hoped for so much.

### Savithri, the Ideal Companion

Savithri, the daughter of Raja Raghubir Singh of Surajpur makes one realise how futile it is to apply the tenets of assertive feminism on the Indian woman. We recall what Coomaraswamy says : "The so-called feminist is as much enslaved by masculine ideals as the so-called Indian nationalist is enslaved by European ideals."<sup>41</sup>

Savithri is a Cambridge (Girton) graduate, obviously well-off as a princess, and radical enough to flout parental authority enough to study abroad, to smoke, drink, to dance in the latest fashion, and to participate enthusiastically in all male conversational gambits, her subject of discussion ranging from communism to metaphysics, jazz to medieval history and literature ancient and modern. When Rama first meets her, he felt she was too modern for him ; he states :

I could not understand these northerners going from strict *purdah* to this extreme modernism with unholy haste. We in the South were more sober and very distant. We lived by tradition—shameful though it might look. We did not mind quoting Sankaracharya in law courts or marrying our girls in the old way, even if they had gone abroad.<sup>42</sup>

For all her modernity, in moments of stress, her emotionally rooted attitudes surface to guide her behaviour. Thereby she affirms the familiar pattern of doomed females and saved males. The preconceived notion that the doomed Indian heroine, who exists mainly on the metaphysical level is the one who endures, is a weak factor in most of these novels. Yet the spiritual heroine is a constant factor in most contemporary Indian fiction.

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41. Coomaraswamy, p. 119.

42. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, pp. 31-32.

Savithri does not live like little Mother ; she does not try to live by the ideals of Indian culture deliberately as the older women do in the novel. However, she is all Indian, all tradition-bound in her innermost core of being. She is the ideal Hindu woman, the companion in life's pilgrimage for Ramaswamy. She is the all influential primal power who instead of enjoying power directly, creates it in man and enjoys it through him. She is the goddess Durga for Rama ; the divine power that saves mankind from daemonic forces. "To worship woman is to redeem the world", states Rama.<sup>43</sup> Then again "All women are perfect women for they have the feminine principle in them, the yin, the *prakriti*."<sup>44</sup> Speaking of his sister, he says, "What a deep and reverential mystery womanhood is. I could bow before Saroja and call her queen."<sup>45</sup>

However, the woman's power is illusory. She is reduced to a symbol and loses direct power. She is put on a pedestal as a goddess and worshipped only to be presently brought down and beaten to her knees by the twin whips of domestic injustice and tyrannical custom. The doomed woman as always, lets someone else be the master of her destiny. Economic independence, educational opportunities and exposure to an international cultural milieu do not prove sufficiently strong enough to resist the pull of tradition.

The Radha Krishna legend which has recurred in one form or another in Indian literature, ancient and modern, also constitutes a recurrent mythical allusion in *The Serpent and the Rope*. Savithri is symbolised as Radha who vows to follow her Lord Krishna, here Ramaswamy, from janam to janam, from birth to birth. "A Hindu woman", says Savithri "knows how to worship her Krishna, her Lord."<sup>46</sup> She worships Rama ritualistically with incense, flowers and lamplight. He in turn touches her forehead with kumkum, the auspicious red powder

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43. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 174.

44. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 311.

45. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 50.

46. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 209.

and gives her votive offerings like coconut, betel nuts and his ancestral bridal toe rings. The process helps in the transmutation of corporeal human beings into the mythic Radha and Krishna.

The woman and her beloved now symbolise an archetypal relation between the seeker and the sought, the Soul and the Absolute. Love becomes sublimated as the symbolic longing of the Individual for the Absolute. This Radha Krishna adoration has all the features of a symbolic Hindu marriage, a Platonic one indeed. Says Rama :

We were so happy and so sad altogether, as though no one could take us away from each other and nobody marry us again. We were not married that morning, we discovered, we had ever been married—else how understand that silent whole knowledge of one another ?<sup>47</sup>

Like Mirabai, Savithri would go through her life as Mrs. Pratap Singh but singing her *bhajans* or devotional song about her Lord Krishna. Rama shows her the path of *Dharma*, her path of duty ; painful though it be, she fulfils his classical concept of womanhood. She transforms his romantic impulses into a metaphysical love, that leads him on to the higher consciousness of a Vedantin. We have numerous examples of the heroines classical and modern, who serve as the agents of salvation for the male. Such pairs as Chandidas and Rami, Jayadeva and Padmavati, Rupmati and Baz Bahadur have been immortalised in Indian literature. Savithri and Rama constitute the modern equivalent to this type of mythic and idealised relationship.

The woman gives him knowledge. She shows him the bridal path to God. She is the server of happiness, not the served. She enjoys the happiness she gives. S.C. Harrex states :

Woman gave Rama the knowledge of himself: the Bombay woman carnally, Little Mother maternally and

47. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, 213.



familiarly, Savithri spiritually and ritualistically in the Hindu sense of marriage and Madeleine sacrificially in the Christian sense and compassionately in the Buddhistic sense.<sup>48</sup>

What is significant in a love relationship is the absolute union of the *purusha* and *prakriti*.<sup>49</sup> The way to true love is not the path of ego assertion. Rama says of Savithri: "Saint I had to become if I would know Savithri, not a saint of ochre and bone-bowl but one which had known the extinction of ego."<sup>50</sup> What C. D. Narasimhaiah says is valid :

The failure (of Madeleine's marriage) is not due to any one cause exclusively, such as Raja Rao's understanding and sympathy. It is not due to the feeble mingling of cultures, though it is there ; not due to the difference of nationalities, ("What fools we are to think the Rhone divided mankind" for the Rhone is sister to Ganga and flowed into her) not due to difference of outlooks and ideas wholly—though all these have contributed but primarily because true marriage is possible only when the ego is dead and when the duality of life is resolved in the one.<sup>51</sup>

What is love ? Rama tells Savithri : For you love is not a system—a canalisation of emotion, an idea. For you love is a fact, an immediate experience, like an intuition."<sup>52</sup> Savithri learns her duty in life, though the path of duty, of *Dharma* is painful. Rama tells her to be "a wife, Savithri, a wife. A true wife."<sup>53</sup> When love becomes an abstraction, a metaphysical concept, Rama can say with assurance : "Love my love, is the self. Love is the loving of love."<sup>54</sup>—Then, under such a scheme it is possible for Savithri to love Rama and marry Pratap. Bounded by the twin concepts of abstract love and

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48. Harrex, *The Fire and the Offering*, p. 188.

49. Coomaraswamy, "Sahaja", in *The Dance of Shiva*, p. 124.

50. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 169.

51. Narasimhaiah, pp. 62-89.

52. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 176.

53. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 364.

54. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 390.

the path of *Dharma* which would not allow her to deviate from her duty to her community, to her family, she accepts the arranged marriage with Pratap for "only the selfish can love in the Western sense."<sup>55</sup>

Hence there is no love triangle either in the story. Madeleine and Savithri do not vie for the affection of Rama. Madeleine in fact finds it difficult to pigeonhole the Indian woman. She exclaims: "But Rama, she is not real. She lives in a world of fantasy—a dream... She is strange, she just bewilders me."<sup>56</sup> Perhaps, being awash in a sea of aggressive careerist women in India, France and England, Rama prefers the tenderness or *madhurya*, devotion or *bhakti* and certitude of Savithri, "the tabernacle of my habitation." We recall the derision with which he converses when Lakshmi Iyengar from the Ministry of Education is around at India House, London.<sup>57</sup>

Perhaps, as Meenakshi Mukherjee suggests, this *bhakti* cult, the fond description of these rituals has its origin in the sentimental longing of the writer himself. Being outside his native land, as an expatriate India he tends to see all actions associated with his country's culture 'enveloped in a mist of nostalgia'. It certainly is rare to find in contemporary India a woman so totally dedicated to a spiritual ideal, a woman in whom the mythic and the ideal are mingled, in whom the thin demarcating line between the ideal and the real is almost obliterated.

Savithri, however, comes alive to the reader not as Radha, the mythic heroine, but as the aggressive, chain-smoking, argumentative, sometimes rebellious and sometimes ~~rebellious~~ girl who refuses to see her betrothed and who struggles valiantly against the impersonal principle of marriage. ~~Even not the~~ fatalistic resignation, the automatic submission of her forebears. She like Saroja, fights a lone, already lost battle. It is at these moments that she is most appealing. Her sense of isolation

55. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, pp. 177, 377, 387, 556, 191.

56. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 129.

57. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 342.

fear of the future, and insecurity all come to the surface on the eve of her marriage to Pratap. She appeals to Rama : "I feel besieged—the Turk is at the door. Help me to jump into the pyre, Lord, my Master, of this life and of all the lives to come. Help me."<sup>58</sup>

She has to accept the inevitable. Little Mother says aptly:

A woman has to marry, whether she be blind, deaf, mute or tuberculous. Her womb is her life and we cannot choose our men. True, in your part of the globe, in Europe, they say they choose their own husbands and I've seen all this in the cinemas. But we are not Europeans. We are of this country—we are Brahmins.<sup>59</sup>

Savithri, after the initial rebellion, shock and paralysis of will tries to find some security, comfort and hope in the traditional role fulfilment of a wife. She writes to Rama : Surajpur Palace. This evening, at four forty-seven, I entered into the state of matrimony. I married Pratap at last. I shall be a good wife to him. Bless me."<sup>60</sup> Once again we are brought face to face with what a marriage means to an Indian woman. For all her pedestal postures as goddess (*devi*) and *sakhi* (ideal companion) she senses the bitter truth—that woman is coeval with dissolution, with death. Bitterly she tells Rama : "We (women) are the fakers, the makers. We make the falsehood that is life, the trinkets. That is why man has such contempt for us."<sup>61</sup>

The social order is placed before the happiness of the man or the woman in marriage. The formula is predetermined ; since both the husband and wife have fixed roles to perform, chances of friction are minimised. It is from this point of view that we can best understand such dictums as "For a woman the sacred feet of her husband be Paradise."

Regardless of the husband's personal merits or defects,

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58. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 292.

59. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, pp. 258-259.

60. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 295.

61. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, pp. 359-360.

regardless of his failure or success as a man, Savithris and Sarojas are required to adhere to the Indian woman's norm of respect and devotion to their husbands. It would be beneath their dignity to deviate from such a norm. For the sake of the community, for the sake of the continuity and vitality of the race, the woman's life must be in tune with the indissoluble union of *purusha* and *Prakriti*. Kalidasa begins the *Raghuvamsa* thus: Just as word and meaning are binomial, indeed be Parvathi and Siva himself.

### Saroja, the Sister

Saroja, the sensitive intelligent sister of Rama reaffirms the pattern of the doomed female. Of Saroja Rama states poetically :

Saroja was a strange sensation for me. Here was a mystery which I had never observed before : the girl becoming a woman and the thousand ways it shows itself, in shyness in language, in prim presence... That Saroja was my sister made the knowledge of her womanhood natural to me—natural to see, to observe and even to breathe... She too wanted to come and study in Europe ; she would be a doctor... It was not Saroja I felt and smelt, but something of the Ganges and the Jumma that rose into my very being. Benares was indeed nowhere but inside oneself. And I know : all brides be Benares born.<sup>62</sup>

This is an indication of what is to happen to Saroja. The father dead and the brother away, Uncle Seetharamu and Little Mother arrange a marriage between Saroja and Subramanya, a civil servant. Little Mother's opinion about the bridegroom is not reassuring : "He is just the man to keep under yoke a betwixt left and right girl like Saroja."<sup>63</sup> What a premise to start a married life on !

Saroja dislikes her betrothed not because he is inept or ugly but because they are not at all on the same wave length.

62. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, pp. 49-50.

63. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 259.

What harmony could one expect in a marriage of two totally unsuited partners? She bewails in a letter to Rama—"He is just not made for me!" What she seeks is a higher vibrant consciousness which he can never aspire to. She feels trapped, isolated and fearful of her future. She tells her brother about their mutual incompatibility: "It is as though if I talked Kanarese he would talk Nepali or if he played golf, I would play chess."<sup>64</sup> It is in the letters she writes to Rama that we sense her existential loneliness.

Rama, in the typical Indian male tradition, chooses to stay until the die is cast and then seeks shelter behind tradition. He tells us: "She wished she had been a European woman: it would have given her so much freedom, so much brightness.

"What freedom?" I exclaimed. "The freedom of foolishness. In what way, Saroja, do you think Catherine or Madeleine is better off than you?"

"They know how to love."

"And you?"

"And we know how to bear children. We are just like a motor car or a bank account. Or better still, we are like a comfortable salary paid by a benign and eternal British government. Our joy is a treasury receipt."<sup>65</sup> Later she adds with bitterness: "Like cotton, we women must have grown on trees..."

Rama finds no answer to give. On the eve of the wedding the young bride is full of panic, however, unceasingly she tries to steel herself. She cries out: "Oh Brother, I want to run away, run away anywhere. I cannot marry him, I must not marry him. It is selfish of me to marry a man whom I detest, I look down upon."<sup>66</sup> All that he could offer her by way of help was a discourse on the transitory nature of life and the

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64. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 127.

65. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 257.

66. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 262.

fact that "we make our own happiness". Saroja did not answer. "I had betrayed her", says Rama.

Stoically the poor girl goes through the wedding rituals, which she likens to a funeral. She spends the night before the ceremony tending her sick brother and reading Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*. The whole show marches inexorable onwards. The wedding hymn is sung: "Saroja was gone from our household."<sup>67</sup>

"I am He  
Thou art She  
I am the Harmony  
Thou the Words.  
I am the Sky,  
Thou art Earth  
Let us twin become one,  
Let us bring forth offspring."

Then Rama adds: Happiness is in a husband, a home children. After all, where would Saroja go?"<sup>68</sup>

There is a poignant scene wherein she seeks her brother's blessing before she goes away. She bravely states: "Brother, I shall bring but a fair name to the household. Do not worry."<sup>69</sup> She, like scores of her fellow country girls have been taught not to besmirch the honour of her family. What matters is not love, happiness, life. The paramount duty of the Brahmin girl is the correct fulfilment of her duty in life, the abiding by the laws of *Dharma*. She writes to her brother from her in-laws' house: "For me life has come to an end. By life I mean hope, work fulfilment. I expect nothing, except I long for you. Brother, come back soon."<sup>70</sup>

Later at novel's end, we hear of Saroja at Allahabad with Little Mother. Rama writes in his diary: "I think of Saroja; she is not happy but she is settled." What matters is not her

67. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 263.

68. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, pp. 272-273.

69. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 271.

70. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 369.

happiness but her role fulfilment as the wife of Subramanya. The conflict between self fulfilment and marriage leads to a separation in Madeleine's life and to resignation in Saroja's. Given her intelligence and vitality, it is a bleak existence. One wonders what might have she done with her life under the Western system of marriage.

Coomaraswamy tells us about the risks involved in a Western type of marriage. Granted there are risks involved ; yet Saroja would have preferred to have and hold the freedom of choice, what her brother calls the 'freedom of foolishness'. This is denied her totally. Uncle Seetharamu pontifically asserts : "A woman is a woman and she must obey even if she has got a first class university degree."<sup>71</sup>

The day after the wedding she leaves her home and starts on a new journey metamorphosed overnight from a bright sprightly young girl into a responsible mature woman. How can she express herself in life ? What opportunities does she have ahead of her ? The traditional responses that Rama and the others around her give, offer very little consolation. They advise her just to be ; to belong, to accept. She should realise that the opportunity given her to be a wife, and a mother is a lifetime vocation and no other specialised interests are necessary.

Savithri and Saroja trying to defer to the models in their culture end up, their vitality eroded and their zest for life quenched. They are bent and broken by biological necessity, traditional pressure and environmental determinism.

An interesting vignette is provided by Sukumari, the youngest sister in the family. She is a spirited girl who rebels and refuses to be cowed down by the menace of respectability. When Saroja is listless, tired of battling against the forces at home and outside Sukumari is different. Rama says : "On the other hand, Sukumari was full of vitality. She had

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71. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 269.

been elected secretary of the school debating society and wanted to become a second Mrs. Pandit. Meanwhile she asked me to send her books on Marxism."<sup>72</sup> All the roads, including that of Karl Marx, lead but to the Absolute.

Towards the close of the novel, we find her married to a Krishnamachari who is a member of the Communist Party. Rama says: "Her letters to me became more and more scarce. I was the arch reactionary for her and she hated me with the hate brothers and sisters have for one another when they cannot agree."<sup>73</sup> Sukumari seems to have broken the familiar pattern of the saved male and the doomed female. Hers is evidently a new way of living, committed to a forceful, pragmatic ideology which is at odds with the Brahminism we have seen so far.

Yet what Rama adds by way of explanation makes us suspect whether it is only a new veneer on the age old pattern of the doomed female and the saved male, whether anything has really changed for the better. Rama continues: "Besides Sukumari having married Krishnamachari, her politics became an act of faith, a duty she owed to her happiness. She had to love and worship her husband—she was too much of a Hindu not to worship her Lord."

Like Irene in *Comrade Kirillov*, Sukumari serves her Lord by committing herself to his ideology wholeheartedly. She is a vigorous version of the modern Indian woman who rivals her ancestors in husband worship. Yet one cannot forget that there were stirrings in her, independent of external pressure, right from her school-days. It is also interesting to recall Savithri's bias towards Communism during her Cambridge days: "My communism is made of Mother India's tears."<sup>74</sup> It is to be hoped that the vitality of such women would be harnessed some day for the improvement of society and not be suppressed under the mantle of wifely devotion and *Dharma*.

72. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 90.

73. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 368.

74. Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 176.



## The Extension of the Mother Principle

What Raja Rao had stated and developed in his earlier novels is reaffirmed and extended in his later novels, *The Cat and Shakespeare* and *Comrade Kirillov*. *The Cat and Shakespeare* is what the author calls it—a metaphysical comedy.<sup>75</sup> Rao asks the reader “to weep at every page not for what he sees, but for what he sees, he sees.” A great deal is left to the reader to infer on his own.

There is not much of a story. Ramakrishna Pai a petty government clerk, lives away from his wife. He now lives in with Shantha, a gentle school mistress in Trivandrum. A child is born to them. Together with Usha, the daughter by the legal life, these three constitute a harmonious household. The story takes place during one year when World War II is still being fought. Govindan Nair is Pai’s neighbour across the ‘wall’. He is Pai’s guru-cum-good neighbour, cum-comic metaphysician. His speech is an eerie combination of Shakespeare and the Vicar of Wakefield.

The cat refers to Marjara Kishora Nyaya, the cat principle which is the basis of a school of Indian thought. The principle is based, as Paul C. Verghese says, on the blissful manner with which the helpless kitten surrenders itself utterly to its mother and is well taken care of and therefore, means that the devotee who adopts an attitude of self surrender to the Creator need have no fears about himself or his near and dear ones in the world.<sup>76</sup> The main thread throughout the book is the assertion of the supremacy of motherhood. Ramakrishna Pai states : “I envy women that they bear children.”<sup>77</sup>

Shantha, the gentle mistress is the symbol of complete surrender. She looks upon Pai as her Lord Krishna. She is an earthier, more vigorous extension of Savithri in *The Serpent and the Rope*. She seems to justify Pai’s dictum : “To be a wife is not to be wed.” He says further : “I like woman, in

75. Iyengar, p. 406.

76. Verghese, p. 152.

77. Rao, *The Cat and Shakespeare*, p. 29.

fact. What is woman you may ask. Well, woman is Shantha." She personifies womanhood for him in its entirety, in all its glory. On her part, "Her giving is complete". "She is not worried about marriage. I am a Brahmin. Shantha is not ashamed to be woman" <sup>78</sup>

The kitten principle works in the life of Govindan Nair too, though sometimes not so smoothly as in the case of Pai.

Ah, the kitten when its neck is held by its mother, does it know anything else but the joy of being held by its mother? You see the elongated hairy thing dangling and you think, poor kid, it must suffer to be so held. But I say the kitten is the safest thing in the world, the kitten in the mouth of the mother cat. Could one have been born without a mother? Modern inventions do not so much need a father. But a mother, I tell you, without mother the world is not. How does one achieve happiness? You have just to look and see, look deep and see. Let the mother cat hold you by the neck. <sup>79</sup>

R. Shepherd explains the whole principle further :

Nair is quite explicit in his analogy. The kitten dangling from the mouth of the mother is 'the world'. The world is created and sustained by a mother principle and even destroyed with the passage of time. Nair uses the word 'know' in its special esoteric sense: that is the sort of conviction that comes as a result of spiritual enlightenment. The majority of people Nair seems to suggest, never come by this kind of knowledge. They live hearing the cat's (unintelligible) words but understand nothing of the implications. Nair and Govindan submit to the will of the mother cat. She is the 'blessed thing' in the language of Govindan which is 'like a ration office'. Govindan and Nair are 'the wall', <sup>80</sup>

peare in the title signify the linking together of the physical and supraphysical realities. Together they demonstrate the Advaidic premise that all difference is only apparent, that everything can finally be related to everything else. It is the same as what Rama in *The Serpent and the Rope* holds to be true. The Advaidic philosophy is essentially assimilative.

Ramakrishna Pai finds his life with Shantha harmonious when he surrenders himself fully. It is then that she, the mother cat, is able to carry him across the wall and give him a glimpse of Paradise : "I found a garden all rosy and gentle. There were flowers and many sweet smelling herbs, there were pools and many orchids that smelled from a distance..."<sup>81</sup> He adds : "I looked in and saw everything."

The principle of surrender is operative at two levels. At one level it is the mutual surrender of the partners in 'marriage'. At the second or higher level human marriage also implies a crossing of the wall, that is, it involves a crossing from the physical to the supra-physical. What is meant is the transcendental surrender of the self to God. The novel is an extension of surrender to the divine principle through the path of devotion, *bhakti marga*. In *Kanthapura* it was devotion to a political ideal, in *The Serpent and the Rope*, it was devotion to a metaphysical ideal and here, in *The Cat and Shakespeare*, it is devotion pure and simple. What was indicated earlier by Savithri is demonstrated in actual living by Shantha. The way to metaphysical knowledge is the way of the Vedantin. It is difficult for the commoner. What Raja Rao seems to advocate here through Nair is the simpler method of complete and blissful surrender to the great Mother or the Cat or the divine will. This is the way for ordinary people like Pai or Nair or Shantha, the way of the common folk to salvation.

Disease, evil, doubt and unhappiness all spring from a state of *avidya* or ignorance in this Mayic philosophy. What the mother cat gives us in para *vidya* or Superior knowledge Pai

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81. Rao, *The Cat and Shakespeare*.

learns there is security in being a kitten sustained by the mother cat, the fundamental regenerative and sustaining principle. What had started out as the path of *Karma* in *Kanthapura* and developed as Juana or the quest for knowledge in *The Serpent and the Rope* is transformed into the path of *Bhaktipratti* (devotion and surrender), one leading into the other.<sup>82</sup> Rama in the earlier novel went in search of his guru. Here Nair as Pai's guru teaches him the way of salvation. In this sense *The Cat and Shakespeare* is a sequel to *The Serpent and the Rope*.

What Savithri and Saroja strive to achieve is reached effortlessly by Shantha following the path of devotion and surrender. In *Comrade Kirillov*, the novel about the dialectics of Communism and its impact on India, we do not have much scope for the discussion of the Indian woman. Nevertheless, here, Irene though born a Czech, is able to commit herself to her husband's creed completely and obtains a release and a freedom denied others. It is in this sense, that her son Kamal is able to inherit the cultural and spiritual identity of his ancestors at Kanyakumari, the meeting place of the three oceans.

### The Mythic Solution

The prognosis for woman based on his novels is not very helpful. He mulls over the problem occasionally but he concentrates his attention on Man and his spiritual quest and salvation. Being continuously on a metaphysical plane, biological differences do not matter to him. His novels treat of such complex metaphysical concepts that one is afraid of an exclusive interest in the woman lest it lead to a diminishing or impoverished appreciation of a gigantic metaphysical tour de force.

One agrees that "life is a riddle. After all you see what your eyes see."<sup>83</sup> We are aware that the ultimate problem facing

82. Iyengar, p. 410.

83. Rao, *The Cat and Shakespeare*, p. 37.

man, male and female inclusive, is a spiritual problem. Yet it is not easy to conjure away the serpent, however, illusory it may be. We recall what Ruth Prawar Jhabvala said to M.E. Derrett : "Here we are all part of one another and beyond and above that part of God. What does the individual matter ? He is just a drop in the ocean and the sooner he forgets himself as a drop and merges completely in the ocean, the better."<sup>84</sup> We may be drops in this world ; yet in this world of *Maya*, while it lasts, we feel we are real and the problem of the Indian woman is ever present and cannot be simply wished away.

The culture he springs from and which he has imbibed so thoroughly in his entire being, precludes Rao from resolving the woman's issue in concrete terms. The conflict between marriage and self-fulfilment that comes up so sharply in the case of Saroja, for example, is not resolved fully. Life, he seems to indicate is not long enough for many achievements. One could either be a wife and mother or something else but never could she be saddled with more than one role in her lifetime.

The visionary metaphysical poet that he is, he does not think in terms of binary opposites of male *versus* female dominance. Nowhere in his work do we find the woman having a role equal to that of the man. She neither determines her life nor defines herself as man does. She can be a part of his transcendent vision only by denying her own reality. The identification of woman with *Prakriti* in the sense of the external, physical world, however, powerful and man with *Purusha*, the higher consciousness, treads on risky ground of dichotomy.

Raja Rao is involved with the individual subject object relationship and not gender identity. In as much as he tends to side with the traditional pattern of identity and does not demar-

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84. Ruth Prawar Jhabvala in a letter to M. E. Derrett. Derrett, *The Modern Indian Novel in English, A Comparative Approach* (Brussels : University of Bruxelles, 1966), p. 22.

cate clearly the thin dividing line between the individual and symbol, the women in his fiction are consistently reduced to vegetative life. Women who dare to aspire for more end up being punished, feeling bitter like Saroja or settle for abject passivity like Savithri dutifully distributing prizes or presiding over the tea table at government receptions.

We are able to understand why Saroja and the likes of her bewail their lot. They have to accept a male oriented mythic structure in which they feel the male is human and the female everything else. Given Rao's metaphysical bent of mind and his traditional leanings, it is difficult for him to resolve the polar tensions between male and female without the surrender of one pole. His perspective is so heavily weighted in favour of the masculine conceptual creative pole that he can hardly be expected to eulogise the principles of assertive feminism. His narrative scheme displays the victory of idea over fact, mind over body, spirit over physical life. The consequence is the creation of female characters who are always seen externally, and who are always reduced to symbols. They are symbols mostly of the spiritual aspects of human life at the behest of the creative male perceiver. We catch here and there glimpses of feminine power and a semblance of a balance between the male and the female. By and large the feminine power is illusory and the male dominance over female behaviour to maintain social order is inevitable and everpresent.

What Saroja or Madeleine or Savithri want by way of marriage is freedom of choice. What they are confronted with is harsh reality. The male typified by Rama laughs at their quest for freedom, 'freedom for foolishness' as Rama puts it. When forced to go through unwanted marriages, the women react predictably: There is initially a paralysis of will—they simply wait to be acted upon instead of acting on life. Then there is a disintegration of the familiar world, intense self analysis followed by a resignation to the inevitability that is life. They typological experience though complex is repetitive enough to reaffirm the pattern of the doomed female.

The marriages in his novels together constitute a dreadful comment on the dread uncertainties of matrimony. There is no fully eventuated harmonious wedded relationship in any of the novels. Existential alienation and searing loneliness is the usual lot of the partners in marriage, especially the wives. What little harmony we find is shown to exist in mythical idealised unions like those of Savithri and Rama, Ratna and Moorthy or in extramarital connections like that of Ramakrishna Pai and Shantha. There are no marriages to speak of, which are based on mutual love, love in the accepted Western sense of the term. The traditional marriages performed amidst complicated rituals and eclat are because of social pressure or custom. The fact that the male, however, intellectual and brilliant, is still incapable of basing a marriage on equality (as in the case of Rama) proves to be a limiting factor.

There are no love triangles to speak of nor is there the familiar concept of adultery. Shantha's relationship with Pai is delineated in *such poetic and philosophic terms* that adultery does not enter the picture at all. Neither can Rama's relationship with Savithri or Shyam Sundar's wife, Lakshmi be so easily labelled. The women in his novels show that immorality is not confined to sexual mores, that what matters is the deeper morality of human sympathies, male and female. The woman whether it is Shantha or Sukumari give off themselves with such refined generosity and vibrant sensitivity that it is difficult to categorise them as fallen women sunk into affairs of abiding flesh.

As has been noted earlier there has been a movement in sensibility from novel to novel—from a youthful, emotionally susceptible basis to a venerable and maternal one which in turn leads to a metaphysical one. But Raja Rao is too deeply rooted in tradition for any radical shift in his attitude towards women. What we find is an extension and a reaffirmation of his concept of womanhood which is continuous from his early to later novels. The artist in him portrays in such characters as Savithri and Saroja the double pulls between his romantic

sensibility idealisation and his awareness of the conditions of despair in an Indian woman. Such women also seem to serve him as a mean of escape from a tired civilization into rosy mythic and vedic fantasies respectively.

The intense pressure of actual living does not permit fantasy nor is it conducive to prolonged meditation and self analysis. Curiously enough, none of Rao's women in fiction seem to suffer from financial difficulties. The actualities of day to day life do not crowd in upon them. They are all relatively well off, economically speaking, unlike Kamala Markandaya's heroines. Madeleine has her professorship, Savithri is a princess, and Saroja is 'well settled' having married a civil servant. Shantha is a school mistress with property of her own. In spite of educational opportunities and economic independence, the woman in his novel is usually fettered by domestic injustice and tyrannical custom. No radical solution to the woman's dilemma is proposed. The solution, if any, is mythic and intensely personal.



## CHAPTER 3

# Bhabani Bhattacharya : The Pure Woman as Victim

*"Who could hold her back from her urge, a woman's primal urge, to be nothing but a woman?"*

—Shadow from Ladakh

*"We who are so wed, serve some real purpose. It is as though we made a bridge between two banks of a river. We connect culture with culture, Mohini, our old Eastern view of life with the new semi-Western outlook."*

—Music for Mohini<sup>1</sup>

Bhabani Bhattacharya presents the Indian woman as the pure woman in his novels. She is pure with exuberant vitality and high ideals, only to be victimised ultimately. Her vitality is crushed, her ideals dig her own grave and she is invariably victimised. Yet Bhattacharya makes the reader feel that she is the ray of hope for mankind, that it is the pure woman, who, though victimised, gives form to an unjust life and informs us and the world we live in with love. The concept of the innocent victimised woman is a continuous thread in his fictional output.

### The Women in the Novels

*So Many Hungers* published in 1947 shows us the woman

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1. Bhabani Bhattacharya, *Music for Mohini* (New Delhi : Orient, 1952), p. 94. All subsequent quotations for *Music for Mohini* will be taken from this source.

being victimised as mother (the peasant mother who is mother not only to her own children but to everyone in the village), as the wife (Monju, the innocent naive woman who marries the idealistic professor Rahoul, Kajoli the simple peasant girl whose idyllic life with Kishore is short lived) and above all, simply as woman, during the horrendous days of the great famine in Bengal in 1942.

*Music for Mohini* shows us the plight of a charming citybred vivacious girl Mohini, torn as under by the taboos of village life by the 'Big House' at Behula, by the cold idealistic posture of her single minded husband, Jayadev, finally to emerge as a bruised and battered victim of the inexorable will of a member of her own species, her own mother-in-law. *He Who Rides a Tiger* published in 1954 tells us about the tangles of economic necessity and caste prejudices that enmesh Chandra Lekha, 'the moon tinted girl'. *A Goddess Named Gold* sees its protagonist Meera Bai, a simple, large hearted, peasant girl caught in the coils of human greed for gold.

The women in *Shadow from Ladakh* published in 1966 are also victimised in one sense or the other. Suruchi is drained of all warmth under the strait jacket leadership of her ascetic minded husband Satyajit. Her daughter Sumita is caught in the same net. Her blind adoration of her father makes her oblivious of the fact that is missing out on life until she meets the engineer, Bhaskar Roy of Steeltown. Bhaskar is the very anti-thesis of what Satyajit stands for. Sumita, needless to say gets caught in the clash between differing ideologies personified by her father and her lover. Rupa, the beautiful half-American, half-Indian girl, epitomises the victim of cross cultural conflicts.

Bhabani Bhattacharya creates the woman protagonist as a finer human instrument than the male. She is a wonderful light, ethereal being filled with radiance, with possibilities. She is pure in the sense that she is close to nature and is in tune with her instinctual urges. She is also pure in the sense that she is filled with noble ideals. Through her, the author aims

at interlinking polarities, at connecting culture with culture, tradition with modernity, the individual and society.

### The Sakhi and the Mai

Two strains meet in his concept of the ideal Indian woman—the fertile woman as the Earth Mother Goddess exemplified by the mother in *So Many Hungers*, the grandmothers in *Music for Mohini*, *He Who Rides a Tiger* and *A Goddess Named Gold* and Suruehi in *Shadow from Ladakh* and the ideal companion woman, the Sakhi whom we find in *Kajoli*, *Mohini*, *Lekha*, *Meera*, *Suruehi* and *Sumita*. Whether she is the goddess or the Sakhi, the companion, the woman inevitably falls a prey to male power hypocrisies. In a harsh Darwinised world her steadfastness gets eroded, her chastity degenerates into corruption and her purity ends in decay and destruction.

The androcentrism inherent in the pattern of doomed females and saved males is, however, somewhat mitigated by the author's faith in the redemptive influence of woman. His consistent Hegelian belief in harmony, in the gradual perfectibility for the human being is encouraging. He tells Janet P. Gemmill in an interview: "Most of us are made up of some good, some evil, some virtue, some vice. The proportions vary, of course. But we are never made in the proportions of Rama and Ravana, all hero and all villain."<sup>2</sup> He is closer to R.K. Narayan than Raja Rao in the sense that he is less metaphysical and inclined to laugh at the foibles of imperfect humanity, however, corroding their influence might be. His villainous characters like Sir Abalabandhu and Motichand, Seth Samsundarji and the stern mother-in-law in *Music for Mohini* are either laughed at or pitied. His latest novel still to be published! tentatively titled *A Dream in Hawaii* also emphasises the universal brotherhood of man.<sup>3</sup>

The women in his novels, in their struggle to break through

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2. Janet P. Gemmill, "An Interview with Bhabani Bhattacharya", in *World Literature written in English* (November, 1975), p. 304.
  3. Gemmill, "An Interview with Bhabani Bhattacharya", p. 309.

the pattern of sexuality and sensuality and to discover themselves as human beings are significant figures of developing life leading the reader to involvement with problems of rapid social change. Change, he shows us, in contemporary India, means opportunity to the woman ; but this opportunity when it comes knocking at her door, is often illusory, a sand trap. The pure woman with all her noble ideals is often destined to be an all time goddess cum bcast of burden. Bhattacharya, however, is optimistic. At the end of each of his novel we find the woman protagonist facing the world full of possibilities.

Bhattacharya like Lukacs sees his fiction as a result of a change in the structure of human consciousness. He is pre-occupied with the social forces at work in his society, the clash between the old and the new, between the haves and the have-nots, and between idealism and pragmatism. His emphasis on disenchantment as the major factor leading to the break up of traditional society, his admiration of the Rousseausque harmony and noble savagery of the peasant folk, his affirmation of the woman as the innocent victim are memorable. These traits link him with the other authors chosen in this study.

### **The Victim as the Redeemer**

There is a kind of quiet intense burning, an abiding world through and beyond biological barriers. The pure woman though battered and bruised by a male dominated, tradition bound society, is not totally crushed. She looks forward to the time when life can be independent of sexual limitations and boundless in its duration with love, sympathy and joy leading to a fulness of experience. At novel's end, Kajoli in *So Many Hungers*, under dire circumstances, resolves to fight the evil procures and starts selling newspapers in the hope of securing a better future for herself and her family.

Mohini, rescued in the nick of time from offering a ceremonial cup of her heart's blood to Devi, the ancestral goddess of the family, is happy at the prospect of becoming a mother at last. As her palanquin is borne away by the bearers, she

resolves to come back to Behula after the birth of her child and united with her husband Jayadev, dreams of turning it into a model village in the whole of Bengal. Chandra Lekha in *He Who Rides a Tiger* is rid of the burden of the falsehood—the imposture as a Brahmin and as a goddess; she looks forward to linking her life with Biten, the noble minded reformer and working for the downtrodden men and women of the lower castes.

Meera in *A Goddess Named Gold* gets down from her artificial posture as Sona Mai, the goddess of gold and desires to settle down to a peaceful life in the village under the watchful and benevolent eye of her grandfather, the wandering minstrel who is elected unanimously to the village board. Reform is definitely in the air in Sonamitti what with the minstrel and Meera, the one on the village Committee and the other leading the 'Cow-house Five', the total woman brigade that brings colour and change to the village. Sumita in *Shadow from Ladakh* can be expected to try uniting the Steeltown of Bhaskar with the Gandhian Sewagram of her father. The woman, though destined to be a victim is also a goddess; she is the redeemer who ensures that life goes on.

### **Love admits Conflicts**

Love in his novels is not mythic or non real or absurd. The flesh is everpresent despite the emphasis on the priority of the mind. What we encounter very often is a Hawthornesque efflorescence of love amidst odd, dire conditions. Kajoli and Kishore love each other under the shadows of a long brittle struggle against a man made famine stalking the land. Mohini loves Jayadev with quiet intensity even though her love is unrequited with Jayadev more preoccupied with the problems of his village and his scholarly studies than with a young, passionate bride and her needs. Lekha hides her heart's warmth towards Biten, saddled as she is with her father's imposture as a Brahmin priest and her own revulsion at anything to do with a sexual relationship after her nightmarish experience in a Calcutta brothel. In *Shadow from Ladakh* we have Suruchi struggl-

ing, her femininity pitted against her husband's asceticism ; Sumita falls in love with Bhaskar who is poles apart from her own milieu.

The woman protagonist, in each novel, is the finest flower of her race and sex. She is thoroughly natural and joyously female, akin to the sculptures in Konarak and Kajuraho. Monju, Lakha, Mohini, Meera and Sumita are young, attractive and not ashamed of their physicality, once awakened. The love, once aroused does not stop at the physical level—it gets sublimated. The pure woman is not only a natural woman but also a noble woman. The author says a good deal by implication about the woman's role in a society which elevates the smoke-screen of arranged marriage into romance. What the pure woman seeks in true love—not love as a carnal male fetter but love as a life force relationship. Torn between her efforts to retain her sources of instinctual gratification and her struggle to seek newer socially acceptable ways of satisfying her need for prestige and esteem, she is inevitably penalised.

### **The Pure Woman as Mother : The Mother of Sevenfold Bliss**

Motherhood in Bhattacharya's fiction, as elsewhere in Indian Literature carries a great deal of affective charge. Following the literary tradition of idealising the mother, Bhattacharya also deifies her. When the woman is reversed, she is reversed as the mother. Lekha in *He Who Rides a Tiger* is the mother of Sevenfold Bliss. Mohini in *Music for Mohini* is the Little Mother of Behula. Meera with her touchstone becomes the Sona Mai in *A Goddess Named Gold*. Marriage is logical culmination in a young girl's life and motherhood is the expected reward. Ananda Coomaraswamy states :

The industrial revolution in India is of external and very recent origin ; there is no lack of men and it is the sacred duty of parents to arrange a marriage for every daughter; there is no divergence of what is spiritual and what is sensuous ; Indian women do not deform their bodies in the interests of fashion ; they are more con-

cerned about service than rights : they consider barrenness the greatest possible misfortune, after widowhood.<sup>4</sup>

Any relationship between the partners in a marriage during the stage of the householder, the *Grahastashrama*, is expected to have reproductive significance. The woman exists to provide progeny who in turn ensure the continuity and vitality of the race. We recall what Rama says in *The Serpent and the Rope* : "Marriages are because deaths must be. The end implies a beginning. The fear of extinction is the source of copulation. You make love that the son be born—the son who will light your funeral pyre"<sup>5</sup> The mother is important in as much as it is she who provides continuity.

Yet the stark fact that the woman is something more than her child bearing potential is very often, conveniently ignored. What is expected and what is the norm is the marriage of female meekness and male sexual aggression. This is socially sanctified so long as the end result is the begetting of sons for the family. Male sexual aggression is an accepted fact. All that the woman could do is to endure the same sexual determinism, the same tragic sense of being a vehicle, not the 'spirit, behind material life.

The situation in *Music for Mohini* exemplifies this. According to Jayadev's horoscope his life would be in danger unless he begets a heir before his twenty eighth birthday. Mohini, his new bride, is given the span of a year to beget a son and ensure her husband's longevity. Her continuing barrenness is a thorn of friction in an otherwise idealistic and high minded family. Stung to the quick by her mother-in-law's charges of her barrenness wrecking havoc upon the family, Mohini is forced to offer a ceremonial cup of her heart's blood to the Devi, the ancestral goddess of the family. An opportune intervention by her husband, now thoroughly awakened to her peril, saves her life in the nick of time. That after her ordeal is over,

she finds herself really in the family way, is an unexpected bonus for the young couple. In order to find her corner of acceptance in the Big House, she had to become a mother. This mantle of motherhood gives the wife a new assurance. It is difficult to discern whether this has been imposed by biological parentage or by social construct. Probably a formidable combination of the two is operative.

### Succour and Sacrifice

Bhattacharya sees the mother in his women protagonists, young and old. In her capacity as the mother, the woman is capable of great self denial and heroic deeds. The mother in *So Many Hungers* decides to put an end to her own life :

She had become a heavy burden to her children. It was hard enough to feed oneself ; what misery to have to provide for a decrepit mother who ailed without cease and could not walk down to the free kitchen ? She must act before it was too late, before she lost her power to think and feel. She must act at once. Mother Ganges hailed her !<sup>6</sup>

Motherhood is indeed something that is out of this world. The old mother setting out on her last journey blesses the children. She is willing to carry the burden of their sins in lives to come : "If they are guilty of wrongs in past lives, let the punishment be mine alone, let me alone work it off, let me drag suffering from life to life."<sup>7</sup>

The mother in *Music for Mohini* astounds Mohini, the new bride, by using her left hand at meal time. When asked, her companion answers thus :

The mother dedicated her right hand to Siva at the Holy City past twice ten years, for the health of her son who was then a little sickly, all skin and bone because of spleen and fever. She may not use the right hand at meals since it was given to the deity and would be de-

6: Bhattacharya, *So Many Hungers* (New Delhi : Orient, 1978), p. 193.

7. Bhattacharya, *So Many Hungers*, p. 193.



filed by the touch of the mouth. There twice ten years she has eaten with the fingers of the left hand only. A Hindu mother's true sacrifice for her son. May be such an act of faith is mocked in the cities where women are incoercible and tough."

Not to be undone by the older mothers, the young girls too compete with one another in motherly tenderness. We have Kajoli who is part mother and part sister to her brother Onu. There is a Mohini who, though accused of barrenness, overflows with motherly tenderness towards Ranjan, the orphan boy at Behula. Lekha in *He Who Rides a Tiger* is willing to brave the wrath of the entire Brahmin crowd and risk excommunication and banishment from the temple and face poverty rather than give up the little Waif Obhijit, whom she literally picked up from the street during the famine. There is also the beautiful poetic vignette of Monju, the new mother. The husband feels "as though Monju was Monju no longer, the one he knew and loved, but something more and something less, remote, unattainable."<sup>9</sup> Monju refrains from participating in the freedom struggle and following her beloved husband to prison. She has her own path of duty cut out for her; she has to take care of her baby girl and stay at home.

The mother is linked with the usual vision of gentleness and nurture. N.E. Derrett gives a just assessment:

The mother is the epitome of the Hindu woman. She has realised herself personally and socially. She both suffers and gains as a result of the Mother Goddess worship. She suffers in that the physical mother is often slighted in favour of the spiritual mother and she gains in that she may be better treated and looked after.<sup>10</sup>

Bhattacharya also affirms her power as the Earth Mother Goddess, in which form she has been worshipped in towns and

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8. Bhattacharya, *Music for Mohini*, p. 85.
  9. Bhattacharya, *So Many Hungers*, p. 14. This compares with Rama's feeling for Madeleine enceinte in *The Serpent and the Rope*.
  10. M. E. Derrett, *The Modern Indian Novel in English, A Comparative Approach* (Brussels: University of Brussels, 1966), p. 52.

villages, from Vedic times. Her power is affirmed beyond the human realm and she is revered as the *Kamadhenu*, the sacred cow of plenitude and prosperity. She is also the giver of life, the fecund deity. She is the protector too ; as Goddess Durga she vanquishes mankind's foes. Coomaraswamy puts it in this way : "As pure male, the Great God is inert, and his 'power' is always feminine and it is she who leads the host of heaven against the demons."<sup>11</sup>

### **The Human versus the Divine**

This deification, paradoxically, makes her defenceless. It is a sort of binding her hands behind her back so that her own life and honour is out of her control. The woman in her wants very much to be part of the human system, to be a fellow human being here and now. The human is suppressed for the sake of the divine. Lekha, Mohini, Meera and Suruchi are victims of this distortion.

Lekha's moon tinted beauty and her brimming physical vitality are emphasised very early in *He Who Rides a Tiger*. Yet by a quirk of fate, her father poses as the Brahmin, Mangal Adhikari and becomes the chief priest of the temple of the newly arisen Siva (thanks to Biten's stratagem of watering buried gram) ; Lekha as his daughter, is also forced to don the role of the Mother of Sevenfold Bliss. People come to her from far and near in supplication, expecting her to perform miracles. At heart she is a warmhearted Bengali girl who looks forward to nothing more than a pact of companionship with Biten, the idealistic reformer, who, eschewing his Brahminism, was a fellow prisoner with Kalo during the female riots in Calcutta. Her physicality as the natural woman rebels against this bogus sanctity and tries to reassert itself. One natural consequence is her outpouring of motherly love towards Obhijit, the low caste street waif she adopts.

Kalo confesses the truth towards the end of the novel ; he

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11. Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva*, p. 121.

cannot bear the sight of his daughter being pressed into the abnormal mould of a goddess : "Out of a simple hearted teenage girl who made no claims to holiness, a girl like ten million others in Bengal, they created a lie as big as the lie inside the temple. They created the Mother of Sevenfold Bliss."<sup>12</sup> His confession brings great relief to Lekha. The brothel where she had been lured unwittingly tried to corrupt her body. The divinity falsely imposed on her worked within, spreading spiritual corruption.

It was not easy to destroy the Mother of the Sevenfold Bliss. The author adds :

But in her deification, more, than her feelings were involved. There was no escape from the simple-hearted men and women who came to pray to her with full hearts and bright faith. She was a tool in other hands—the fake but compulsive hands of the Mother of Sevenfold Bliss. She had destroy the Mother.<sup>13</sup>

Hard on her heels is Seth Motichand who finds her now a business asset with beauty. The Mother is a paying proposition ; he would like to have her as his fifth wife.

It takes all of her courage and her father's to dethrone themselves voluntarily from the tiger of fraudulence that they have been riding. Feet firm on earth they confront harsh reality with dignity; they no not despair of the uncertain future that awaits them.

In *A Goddess Named Gold*, Meera, the simple peasant girl faces a similar dilemma. Her grandfather is a mystic minstrel who gifts her with a touchstone, a *taveez* that is reputed to turn base metal into gold, everytime the wearer did an act of pure kindness. The girl's problems begin when the local money lender Seth Syamsundarji, like Motichand, enters into a business deal with her. She is loaded with copper—the goddess mother is ready to gift everybody in the village with gold—yet the miracle does not recur.

12. Bhattacharya, *He Who Rides a Tiger* (New Delhi : Hind, 1955), p. 228.

13. Bhattacharya, *He Who Rides a Tiger*, p. 274.

Meera is torn between the mystic ideals of her grandfather and the people's lust for gold. She is posed between the two, "now an unconscious instrument for evil, now a conscious instrument for good."<sup>14</sup>

The simple villagers adore her as *Sona Mai*, the gold goddess. She, ever the compassionate mother, is willing to dispense her gold to the needy. Yet when no gold is forthcoming, when her copper ornaments stay copper, when the paltry coins the poor had so hopefully tied at her waist do not transmute into gold, when faith gets eroded, she is alienated, abused and pushed down abruptly from the pedestal of the goddess. The goddess of *Sonamitti*, turns into the scourge of *Sonamitti*.<sup>15</sup>

An effigy burning and casting of witchcraft spells are planned against her. All the combined efforts of her grandmother and her women's brigade, the Cowhouse Five are needed to safeguard the poor bewildered girl. Her troubles end when she casts the touchstone into the river. As the minstrel explains, the touchstone symbolised freedom, freedom of the spirit :

Brothers, now that we have freedom, we need acts of faith. Then only will there be a transmutation. Friends, then only will our lives turn into gold. Without acts of faith, freedom is a dead pebble tied to the arm with a bit of string, fit only to be cast into the river.<sup>16</sup>

Meera Bai is no longer *Sona Mai*. The garb of the goddess mother is cast into the river along with the touchstone. Meera, like Mother India newly freed of alien rule, looks forward to a future full of promise.

With Suruchi in *Shadow from Ladakh*, we face another aspect of the same problem. Married to Satyajit, the stern ascetic disciple of Gandhi and Tagore, she has to be, willy nilly, the embodiment of her husband's unwavering ideals. Idealism is

14. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English* (Bombay : Asia Publishing House, 1972), p. 418.

15. Bhattacharya, *A Goddess Named Gold* (New Delhi : Hind, 1960), p. 224.

16. Bhattacharya, *A Goddess Named Gold*. p. 303.

part of the Indian literary tradition : it is reflected in the yearning for Ramrajya, the perfect kingdom, for Swaraj, independence ; for spiritual quest, Sadhna ; for *pativrata*, chaste womanhood. Suruchi is fettered by his concept of ideal womanhood ; it drains her of her gregarious high spirits, her motherly warmth, her very essence of femininity. In the process, she becomes the ideal mother of Sevagram, the Gandhian village built and sustained by Satyajit. But how much had she lost in the bargain ! The scene where she breaks the bangles on her arm in deference to the austerity of her family life is pathetic.<sup>17</sup>

The vow of celibacy that Satyajit imposed early in his marital life runs counter to her very nature. She, as the model mother in the village is asked to deny her femininity, her instinctual urges. She dreams about the sons she never had the opportunity to beget ! The author tells us :

He (Satyajit) would not understand what her denial would mean. What did that matter ? She would be his companion in ideas even if they were so very strange. But she did not know yet the full meaning of her denial, the suffering to come. The suffering of the woman and the mother. It was not enough to have only one child and she had lived long on the edge of expectation. Two sons—<sup>18</sup>

Her posture as the self denying idealistic mother is so unnatural that even Sumita, her own daughter feels estranged from her. The woman who has become a dried up stone goddess does not want the process to be repeated in her daughter's life. She advises Sumita : "Remember this : when you marry, make up your mind to have many children. Let nothing stand in your way. Nothing."<sup>19</sup> Who could hold back her primal energy as a woman, as a mother ?

It takes the combined crisis of Steeltown invading Sevagram

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17. Bhattacharya, *Shadow from Ladakh* (New Delhi : Hind, 1956), p. 44.

18. Bhattacharya, *Shadow from Ladakh*, p. 24.

19. Bhattacharya, *Shadow from Ladakh*, pp. 25, 274.

and the Chinese invading India to jolt Satyajit back to the practical realm of affairs. Suruchi by now has been bled too long to pick up anew the threads of a full blooded life suffused with motherly warmth.

There is a good deal at stake behind the apparent simple adoration of the mother. It is not merely a question of the conflict between the human and the divine, the selfish and the selfless is every woman. The concept of the goddess makes one forget that the mother, however, exalted, is primarily a woman and she longs to be a whole live being, just like her male counterpart. The tragedy of it is that no man in her life will let her be so. In the deification of the mother lies the destruction of the woman's psyche.

### **Wife and Beloved : The Pure Woman's Subdued Murmurings and Unspoken Demands**

Bhattacharya presents the *Sahadharmini*, the partner in *Dharma*, the wife, as pure, innocent and at the same time earthier than elsewhere. The nearest approximation of his ideal heroine in Western literature would, perhaps, be Thomas Hardy's Tess. Like Tess, Mohini, Lakha, Rupa and Sumita are seen pulsating with conflicting desires, physical and spiritual. It is equally difficult for them to find a corner of acceptance in a well defined area of living. Like Tess, they are wrong end of the sexual telescope, the receiving end.

Bhattacharya tries to show us that the woman as a wife or beloved is not only the primal fecundator but also the all too human and equal companion of man. Equality, however, does not mean sameness. Each carves his/her own path, towards *Moksha* or Salvation. He implies that the woman's sexuality is immensely varied, delicate and cannot be stereotyped. This is exemplified by several incidents in Mohini's marital life. The night of the Flower-Bed, their first time together, Jayadev is lost in her loveliness. He muses :

Did she know herself, the Maitreyi in her ? It was his foremost duty to make her aware of herself, he had

been telling himself for several hours and now that the time had come he started to speak his rehearsed piece, flustered and determined.<sup>20</sup>

While he rattles on about the interminable sacred bond between husband and wife and the one spiritual income between them, Mohini, tense with expectation, tears the jasmine petal chain around her neck. "The sight of her bright teeth tearing at the flower chain stopped him in mid sentence. His words rang hollow and unreal. Her face showed the power of her passion. Something vital but sublimated was struggling in him for expression."<sup>21</sup> He is subject to the double pulls of the stern idealist and the all too human husband.

We see the contrast once again in these words: "Jayadev called her Maitreyi. Maitreyi who lived three thousand years ago. Maitreyi the wife and inspiration of Yagnavalkya, the greatest thinker of his age, who had strained for immortality."<sup>22</sup> And Mohini? She was an ordinary fun loving girl who had no ambitions to be Maitreyi. "She hated serious study for which she had as patience. She needed life, feeling. She was not curious about East-West culture patterns. No one, by temperament, could be less like Maitreyi."<sup>23</sup>

Jayadev, however, persists in his illusion. He "who had no knowledge of the soul of a woman, nourished his odd illusion and sought in his wife a source of inspiration." Mohini, poor girl, deprived of warmth, companionship and the familiar comfort of her parental home, suffers silently. Jayadev, she feels, would never know the measure of her denial. Did he see any of her denials? Or did he simply take them for granted?<sup>24</sup>

Mohini suppresses her human demands.

"For his sake she would absorb new ways of thought and habit, cultivate new interests. She set her mouth; life

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20. Bhattacharya, *Music for Mohini*, p. 90.

21. Bhattacharya, *Music for Mohini*, p. 91.

22. Bhattacharya, *Music for Mohini*, p. 104.

23. Bhattacharya, *Music for Mohini*, p. 105.

24. Bhattacharya, *Music for Mohini*, p. 106.

was a serious business, and she was no doll in silk and satin. She was the mistress of the Big House, a position higher than any other woman's in Behula village. She had duties to discharge, responsibilities. How could she let herself be defeated by discomfort and desolation?<sup>25</sup>

The marriage is a gamble, the odds piled heavily against Mohini. She tries to adjust to her new mode of living—in the process, her inner core of femininity gets destroyed :

So she deceived him with her wishful thinking. And he naively believed her and was soothed. The true happiness of a woman, he told himself with a smile, was to be a mistress of her own household. Give a woman bright playthings—the money to spend, the kitchen to run, the power and prestige. There lay the material to make her content. Yes, men and women are altogether different.<sup>26</sup>

The suppression of her femininity leads to the suppression of her spiritual nature too !

Other incidents in the succeeding novels reinforce the victimisation of the wife and or the beloved. One recalls the nightmarish experience of Lekha in the Calcutta brothel and her subsequent revulsion of any contact even remotely tinged with sexual implications. Part of her vital nature has been destroyed ; she finds it hard to pick up the threads of normal life which is offered to her by Biten. We have Rupa and Bhaskar in *Shadow from Ladakh*; mutually attracted and yet destroying each other everytime they are thrown together. It is Rupa who emerges the victim ; to preserve her sanity, she decides to flee Steeltown. Bhaskar has the regenerative umbrella of Sumita ; Rupa has no such protective mantle. We have Suruchi, in the same novel, whose measure of self denial has not been taken note of by anybody, least of all by her husband. She, like Mohini, finds it equally hard to be an idealistic wife. What the author says about Mohini is equally applicable to her : "She would rather have the commonplace things of life, like

25. Bhattacharya, *Musie for Mohini*, p. 106.

26. Bhattacharya, *Musie for Mohini*, p. 107



other girls. She was not made to be an idealist. She couldn't bear the strain."<sup>27</sup> Bireswar Basu, the colleague of Satyajit, notices and grieves at this wanton destruction of Suruchi's femininity; he, however, like the typical Indian male, avoids involvement and keeps away. Later, meeting Sumita wrapped in her father's asceticism, he calls her "anti life".

The woman as the wife and the beloved finds no listener for her subdued murmurings. Her unspoken demands are not recognised at all. She tries hard as wife, beloved and mother to defer to the idealised models in her culture. Yet she is victimised. She respects the rights of others only to have her own infringed upon. Susan Lydon says with justifiable concern: "The sad thing for women is that they have participated in the destruction of their own eroticism."<sup>28</sup>

### The Janus faced Woman

What is significant here is that the presence of the woman as primarily a physical human being is affirmed, however, futile the affirmation may be in a male dominated tradition bound social structure. Brought up in a milieu which preaches non-stop about male supremacy, the woman is Janus faced: she has to satisfy her natural urges as a human being and at the same time fulfil her role expectation—she has to be to the husband like shadow to substance.

The destruction of the woman's psyche becomes voluntary, to a good extent, aided and abetted as she is, by her belief in the doctrines of *Karma* and *Maya*. What we encounter in most of these contemporary novels is ironic pessimism. Life is illusory; everything is a *lila*, a play of the gods. The woman seems to concur with Albert Camus: "Why rebel if there is nothing permanent in oneself worth preserving?"<sup>29</sup>

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27. Bhattacharya, *Music for Mohini*, p. 129.

28. Susan Lydon, "Liberating Woman's Orgasm", in *The New Eroticism*, ed. Philip Nobik (New York: Random House, 1970), pp. 225-6. Also Bhattacharya, *Shadow from Ladakh*, pp. 273, 274. He tells us about the pure woman's primal urge to be nothing but a woman.

29. Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, tr. by Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage, 1959), p. 16.

The struggle of the woman protagonist of Bhattacharya consists chiefly in breaking this circle of passivity. Mohini, Lekha and Sumita are willing to readjust their lives for the sake of a parental pat on the back. But they do not remain passive victims for long. Each woman tries to break out of the vicious circle, in some way or the other. The process is long and arduous ; some end up totally destroyed, cast off or shored up as driftwood like the old mother in *So Many Hungers* and Suruchi in *Shadow from Ladakh* ; others like Lekha, Mohini and Meera look forward to facing life's challenges with renewed vigour. Bhattacharya's faith in the power of the woman as the redeemer lightens the sombre picture.

### **From Novel to Novel : The Layered Effect**

The women in the earliest novel *So Many Hungers* are simple, symbolic characters, each representing a basic concept. Kajoli is the peasant girl ; Monju the young bride and old mother the archetypal Mother, the epitome of suffering Mother India. They are arresting characters ; yet one feels they are more representative than individualistic in their function. These basic character types reappear in the later novels but with a layered effect which makes them more interesting to the reader.

Mohini is more complex and consequently more charming ; she has the vivacity of Kajoli—she climbs trees until her mother-in-law forbids her : “No mistress of the Big House in past thousand years would have climbed a tree—ever.”<sup>30</sup> She is more developed than Monju, the bashful bride of Rahoul in the first novel. While Monju's frustration at Rahoul's idealism is briefly touched in passing as it were, here, Mohini's conflict with her husband is dwelt with in detail. They are aware of their capacity to destroy each other. He needed more of the heart and she more of the mind :

A man closer to life, more attuned to reality would have achieved an inner balance with little strain, fulfilling

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30. Bhattacharya, *Music for Mohini*, p. 132.

the claims of both his mind and heart. But Jayadev, detached from the world, shrank from life, afraid of his own awakened spirit, with its needs and demands. He closed himself in a safe cell of delusion.<sup>31</sup>

Hiding his feelings behind a mask of study and silence, he bewilders Mohini: "It was as though he had no need of her except physically. And physically satisfied he withdrew himself into another universe. Had he no love for her, no deep feeling at all?" Mohini's anguish bursts forth; she is not the quiet Monju who accepts, who belongs: "She could have trampled on his books. She could have screamed. With desperate will she tightened her lips, turned and fled."<sup>32</sup>

Monju accepts Rahoul's way of life. At novel's end we see her calmly bidding farewell to Rahoul who becomes a political prisoner in British India. Mohini, on the other hand, does not give in so easily, so predictably; she forces awareness on a hitherto unseeing, oblivious Jayadev: "And the realisation hit him that it was not his work alone. The Big House stood between them. The unaccustomed ways of life oppressed her and he who had imposed them on her must face the result." He realises the latent power in her to aid or destroy his creative dream about his village.

Lekha in *He Who Rides a Tiger* is more sensitive and introspective than Mohini and is consequently more intriguing. The character of Suruchi has so many layers of complexity as beloved, wife and mother that she appears as a finely polished multifaceted gem of a woman beyond peer in his fictional output. In the progression of the woman protagonist towards multidimensional density, the basic premise is not forgotten. The woman in her quest for something basic and pure in life invariably ends up being victimised. Nevertheless she strives towards harmony. Life has to be music—the true quest of every woman, her deepest need.

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31. Bhattacharya, *Music for Mohini*; p. 124.

32. Bhattacharya, *Music for Mohini*, p. 125.

## The Woman in India and India in Her

A curious feature of Bhattacharya's fiction is the close tie not only between the author and his women protagonists but also between them and their country. There is a tenuous link between the portentous events in the nation's history and the crises in the lives of the women portrayed. It is as though the woman power is operative constantly at two levels, the family and the nation.

Each novel is set against the backdrop of a challenging national theme. *So Many Hungers* sees the days of the Bengal famine and the national struggle for independence, which is taken up again coupled with intercaste and communal conflicts in *He Who Rides a Tiger*. *Music for Mohini* is set against a backdrop of land reform and the rich landowners, the Zamindars, not all of them so enlightened like Jayadev. *A Goddess Named Gold* unfolds against the backdrop of India gaining independence and the first elections at the village level. *Shadow from Ladakh* depicts India at the time of the Chinese invasion of 1962 and also includes the struggle between Gandhism and Nehruism in the national history.

What India goes through in the years during the early years following independence is reflected in these heroines. Mother India's struggle is seen in each and every home. The author uses them subtly as the mouthpieces of the rapid changes in society, the turmoil and the insecurity of the times. If the village elections wreck havoc with Meera's life at Sonamitti, the distribution of grain to the needy, of land to the landless, the selling of ancestral jewels to discharge responsibilities and the starting of free schools and clinics in Behula occupy Mohini fully. Lekha joins hands with Kalo and Biten to fight caste prejudices and economic injustice. Suruchi and Sumita try to link up differing ideologies Vedic and Western, Gandhi and Nehru, Mud Hall and Factory, earthen pot and air-cooler; the traditional spinning wheel of Sumita is poised along with Rupa's turbine and generator. The women serve as connecting links in times of change and they prove to be oases of

peace and dignity amidst a deserts waste of turbulence, in spite of their own inner turmoil.

### Connecting Culture with Culture

This role of the connector, the bridge, linking the polarities of life is specifically given by Bhattacharya to his women protagonist. We have just now seen how the opposites are ranged one against the other in *Shadow from Ladakh*. Similarly in *Music for Mohini* we find Mohini serving as the bridge between city life and country life, modernity and tradition, Western and Eastern ways of living, pragmatism and passion and idealism and spirituality. Her sister-in-law serves as the connector in the other way—she, the country bumpkin, has to link Behula with Calcutta<sup>33</sup>

There is Sudha, Saturn's Eyesore, fighting against village superstition and hastening enlightenment and understanding towards widow remarriage and dowryless wedding in a sleepy, tradition gound village. There is Lekha who serves as the bridge of understanding between the Brahmins and the low caste Camars and other Harijans, though she is torn in the process. Even the threat of external aggression does not diminish the woman's mediating influence. Witness Rupa's attachment to the Chinese aliens which makes for mutual understanding even though at that time China had attacked India.

Even the love trangle as it develops slightly in one or two novels is defused by one of the women concerned. The woman here makes music, creates harmony, not conflict. Sudha gives way to Mohini, overwhelmed by the latter's kindness and generosity despite the smouldering in her heart about the luck lines in her hand. Similarly Rupa in *Shadow from Ladakh* chooses to flee rather than succumb fully to the magnetism of Bhaskar—she leaves the way clear for Sumita from Sewagram, newly awakened to the pleasures of the body, of Steeltown, of modernity. Like some stone goddess suddenly come alive in the twentieth century, she is to serve as the link between the

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33. Bhattacharya, *Music for Mohini*, p. 125.

opposing factions in the story. There is a little of Satyajit and in Bhasker and a little of Bhasker in Satyajit and Sumita will bind the two with a knot of love. This is the poet's fancy that should hold the key to the future. Sumita, moulded in her father's image, yet marrying Bhaskar is the image of author's faith and hope in humanity.

### **Once a Victim, always a Victim ?**

Each of his novels ends with the woman, however victimised, facing the future with confidence. Manju, Kajoli, Mohini, Lekha, Sumita and even Suruchi do not constitute the literature of despair. Through them the author sets out to show that sexuality is but one aspect of the total picture of man/woman. For a fully integrated personality, the spiritual and the physical are both necessary. One need not be victimised at the expense of the other.

Bhattacharya looks forward to social change. Change for him is positive, not apathetic ; nor is it insignificant. In this respect he differs from Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan and beckons to younger novelists in the country. He affirms again and again that the woman need not be a victim ; she can play a positive role in the development of society. He presents an optimistic, affirmative picture.

One strengthening feature here is the warmth of the woman as exhibited in family relationships. The daughter, Mohini, Kajoli, Lekha and Sumita are affectionate, vivacious beings and bear witness to the warmth of femininity. They offer glimpses of tenderness in family life amidst so many uncertainties and vagaries of change. With such abundant generosity of the heart, a woman cannot remain a victim for long. She is an augury for a better future for her family, for her country.

Bhattacharya's heroine brings everything together in the unity of her wonder, purity and high nobility. The beauty she casts over things lies in the shading to tones, shadows, glimpsed depth and intuited charms, that excite the mind in the process of discovering life. She may be muted often enough.

She is often not able to be explicit or articulate enough to tease out of full structure of human perceptions. But the dynamism of her projected personality is felt everywhere, now visible and now latent. The novel according to Bhattacharya, is the story of the woman as the redeemer, the reformer around whom social change whirls.

### Are we not greater than our Karma ?

Srinivasa Iyengar states : "The confrontations are sharp enough, and are ranged at various levels, but where is the resolution of the conflict, even the possibility of it?"<sup>34</sup> There are not any simple resolutions anymore. The women are thrown into a whirlpool of a world along with the men and are burdened with a great many choices and responsibilities. They are caught in the counterpulls of existence and impurity. Only the strongest survive.

Yet Bhabani Bhattacharya does not give way to despair. Granted existence is akin to Sartrean nausea, he still does not adopt a negative attitude towards life. He seeks to replace the old defeatist notion that human nature is the result of *Karma*, that nothing will ever change, that everything is transient and illusory by a positive visionary approach. In this respect he is close to his women protagonists. Through them he feels his kinship with life, with living beings. Like the women in his fiction, he is suffused by a vision of human beings alive and sensitive, warm and outgoing, responding challengingly to the many forces abroad that can be modified and directed towards a better future.

Bhattacharya asks us to join hands with Mohini and Jayadev, Lekha, Sumita and Bhaskar and forge ahead with quiet confidence. After all, as Jayadev points out, "Are we not greater than our *Karma*?"<sup>35</sup>

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34. Srinivasa Iyengar, p. 421.

35. Bhattacharya, *Music for Mohini*, p. 180.

## CHAPTER 4

# R.K. Narayan : Nightmare Comedy and the Ideology of Acceptance

*All Mr. Narayan's comedies have had the undertones of sadness.*

—Graham Greene,  
Introduction to *The Financial Expert*<sup>1</sup>

*And it has since become clear to me that for all their delight in human oddity, Narayan's novels are less the purely social comedies I had once taken them to be than religious books, at times religious fables and intensely Hindu.*

—V.S. Naipaul  
*India : A Wounded Civilization*<sup>2</sup>

*The law of life can't be avoided. The law comes into operation the moment we detach ourselves from our mother's womb. All struggle and misery in life is due to our attempt to arrest this law or get away from it or in allowing ourselves to be hurt by it. The fact must be recognized. A profound unmiti-*

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1. R.K. Narayan, *The Financial Expert* (1952. rpt. Mysore : Indian Thought, 1958), p. vii. All further references in the text are from this edition of the book. Graham Greene in his introduction to the novel states : "All Mr. Narayan's comedies have had the undertone of sadness. Their gentle irony and absense of condemnation remind us how difficult comedy is in the West to-day—farce, savage, boisterous, satirical, is easy, but comedy needs a strong framework of social convention with which the author sympathiscs but which he does not share."
  2. V.S. Naipaul, *India, a Wounded Civilization* (1977. rpt. Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1979), pp. 21-22. All further page references in the text are from this edition.



acted loneliness is the only truth of life. All else is false...  
The law of life. No sense in battling against it.

—R.K. Narayan,  
*The English Teacher*<sup>1</sup>

The futility, the frustration and her own insupportable weakness made her carry and sell. "A wretched fate that wouldn't let me drown the first time. I can't go near the water again. This is defeat. I accept it. I am no good for this fight. I am a barren pole."

—R.K. Narayan,  
*The Dark Room*<sup>2</sup>

His wife as a child must have pleased her grandmother by her behaviour and been rewarded for it. Her life was reduced to a mere approved behaviour in the midst of father, mother, grandmother and uncles; and later in life, parents-in-law, husband and so on and on endlessly, till one had no opportunity to think of one's own views on any matter, till it grew into a monia as in his wife.

—R.K. Narayan,  
*Mr. Sampath*<sup>3</sup>

He was frightened of her. She seemed too magnificent to be his wife.

—R.K. Narayan,  
*Waiting for the Mahatma*<sup>4</sup>

Everything in this home had the sanctity of usage, which was the reason why no improvement was possible.

—R.K. Narayan,  
*The Vendor of Sweets*<sup>5</sup>

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3. Narayan, *The English Teacher* (1943, rpt. Mysore: Indian Thought, 1933), p. 192. All further page references in the text are from this source.
  4. Narayan, *The Dark Room* (1932, rpt. New Delhi: Orient, 1976), pp. 123-24. All further page references in the text are from this edition.
  5. Narayan, *Mr. Sampath* (1949, rpt. Mysore: Indian Thought, 1936), p. 32. All further page references in the text are from this edition.
  6. Narayan, *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1933, rpt. Mysore: Indian Thought, 1936), p. 167. All further page references in the text are from this edition.
  7. Narayan, *The Sweet Vendor* (London: The Bodley Head, 1967), p. 25. All further page references in the text are from this edition of the novel.

*She often broke down on small issues, but this seemed to leave her unperturbed. She merely said, 'I felt all along you were not doing right things. This is Karma. What can we do?'*

—R.K. Narayan,  
*The Guide*<sup>8</sup>

*What sort of a married life is this going to turn out to be? Separate lives and separate everything! Only the roof was to be common, and perhaps the bed—even of that he was not certain how long. She might want to lock herself in her room and forbid him to enter. Should he write a NO ADMISSION sign and present it to her as a wedding gift?*

*"Let us face the fact", she whispered, her breath wafting on his face. "Married life is not for me. I have thought it over. It frightens me. I am not cut out for the life you imagine. I can't live except alone. It won't work..... I want to forget my moments of weakening and you must forget me, that's all."*

*He reflected, 'May be we will live together in our next Janma. At least then she will leave people alone, I hope.'*

—R.K. Narayan,  
*The Painter of Signs*<sup>9</sup>

R.K. Narayan has enjoyed the longest novelistic career among the six authors discussed in this study. His earliest novel, *Swami and Friends* was published in 1935.<sup>10</sup> He has endured as an unique man of letters for some forty-five years by never telling a bad story and his latest novel *The Painter of Signs* published in 1976 keeps that splendid record alive. He has a guarded, skeptical, and detached attitude towards his material characters. The ironic filter of his personality is everpresent to elevate his novel into 'an intensely Hindu fable' as V.S.

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8. Narayan, *The Guide* (1958, rpt. Mysore : Indian Thought, 1978), p. 216  
All further page references in the text are from this edition.
  9. Narayan, *The Painter of Signs* (1976 ; rpt. Mysore: Indian Thought, 1977), pp. 172, 179, 185. All further page references in the text are from this edition of the novel.
  10. A list of R.K. Narayan's novels with the dates of their first publication would prove useful for the purposes of this study :  
*Swami and Friends*, 1935 ; *The Bachelor of Arts*, 1937 ; *The Dark Room*, 1938 ; *The English Teacher*, 1945 ; *Mr. Sampath*, 1949 ; *The Financial Expert*, 1952 ; *Waiting for the Mahatma*, 1955 ; *The Guide*, 1958 ; *The Sweet Vendor*, 1967 ; *The Painter of Signs*, 1976.

Naipaul terms it.<sup>11</sup> At any rate, his comic sense of detachment prevents his novel from degenerating into a small town romance.

All his novels are centered in and around Malgudi, a small town in South India. But Malgudi, as Walsh points out, is a metaphor for India.<sup>12</sup> When Narayan thinks of Malgudi, of India, it is not in terms of a political or economic entity but as a spiritual entity. In this sense, he reaffirms Raja Rao's dictum: 'India is an idea, a metaphysic'!

India then, is not a country; it is a condition of the heart and mind, and attitude of acceptance, scattered among the continents, an universal condition, rather than a restricted entity bound by geographical location and frontiers. The specific symbols of Hinduism like Shiva and Parvati, the Ganges, Benares and Malgudi are universalised by virtue of their forceful repetitive connotations. What they represent is not unique to India—they are part of our human heritage. Narayan would agree with Rao's protagonist, Ramaswamy in *The Serpent and the Rope*: "India is the kingdom of God and is within one"; "India makes everything and everywhere an India."<sup>13</sup>

In the four decades of a widely acclaimed career as a novelist, Narayan has dealt with a panoply of themes and motifs.<sup>14</sup> Some of them are significant for the purposes of this

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11. Naipaul, *India, A Wounded Civilization*, pp. 21-2.

12. William Walsh, "R. K. Narayan", *Writers and Their Works*, No. 224 (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1971), p. 6. According to Walsh, by comparing Malgudi and India, Narayan makes us feel that the human idiom of Malgudi is the human idiom of India and also, by extension, of the world.

13. Raja Rao, *The Serpent and the Rope*, (New Delhi: Orient, 1968), p. 331. According to Rao, India, being an idea, "is contiguous with time and space, but is anywhere, everywhere." Narayan's idea of Malgudi, of India, concurs with this view.

14. See S.C. Harrex, 'R.K. Narayan: Malgudi Maestro' *The Fire and the Offering: The English Language Novel of India 1935-1970* (Calcutta: Writer's Workshop, 1978), II, pp. 11-103; Meenakashi Mukherjee 'Renunciation as an Ideal Myth as Technique', *The Twice Born Fiction* (New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1974), pp. 96-162; V. S.

study—the place of the woman in Indian society, the disruptive influences of modernity, the status of the wife and the mother in a society in flux, the *femme fatale*, the crumbling of the joint family and similar older institutions, the limitation, of the newer materialistic way of life, the consequences of flouting time honoured codes of behaviour, the impact of Western cultural concepts, the Indian woman's passive or assertive adjustment to Western and readjustment to traditional values, the validity and relevance of Hindu cultural and religious concepts such as *Karma*, Mayic philosophy, life after death, renunciation and acceptance; and finally, a lively, sardonic discussion of new theories like free love, woman's liberation, birth control and their implications on characters, both male and female.<sup>15</sup>

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14 (Contd.)

Naipaul, 'An Old Equilibrium', *India: A Wounded Civilization* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), pp. 18-33; C. D. Warasinhaiah, ed., *Fiction and the Reading Public in India* (Mysore: University of Mysore, 1967); *The Swan and the Eagle* (Simla: The Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1969); K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, 'R. K. Narayan', *Indian Writing in English* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1972), pp. 358 to 385; C. Paul Verghese, 'The Art of R. K. Narayan', *Problems of the Indian Creative Writer in English* (Bombay: Somaiya Publications, 1971), pp. 133-141; William Walsh, 'Nataraja and the Pocket of Saffron: The Indian Novel in English', *Readings in Commonwealth Literature*, ed. William Walsh (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), pp. 51-57; see also William Walsh, 'The Spiritual and the Practical', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, No. 5 (July 1968), p. 121; Alphonso-Karkala, 'Symbolism in the Financial Expert', *Indian Writing Today*, 11 (1970), 14-18; Shirley Chew, 'A Proper Detachment: The Novels of R.K. Narayan', *Southern Review* (June 1972), pp. 147-159; Nissim E. Zeki, 'Naipaul's India and Mine', *New Writing in India*, ed. Adil Jussawalla (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), pp. 71-90; Adele M. Fiske, *Karma in Five Indian Novels, Literature East and West*, X: 1-2 (1966), pp. 93-111; 'The Quintessential Narayan', *Literature East and West*, Nos. 1, 2 (Winter/Spring, 1966); Ved Mehta, 'The Train Had Just Arrived at Malgudi Station—Profile of R.K. Narayan', *New Yorker* (15 September 1962), pp. 51-76; R.K. Narayan, 'To an Inquirer', *The Illustrated Weekly of India* (26 May, 1963); Keith Carebian, 'The Spirit of Place in R.K. Narayan', *World Literature Written in English* (November, 1975), pp. 290-298.

15. See for an exhaustive list of the various themes dealt with in Narayan's fiction, S.C. Harrex, *The Fire and the Offering*, vol.

The varied options available to the modern Indian woman—from traditional motherhood to manless life style—all are given local habitation and colour by Narayan in his novels. The range is so varied and vast that one can, at best, hope, to illuminate the role of a few of the more prominent women characters in his novels, risking all the time the charge that an exclusive interest in the female may often lead to an impoverished and lopsided appreciation of the novel as a whole.

Yet the woman in his fiction is a powerful vehicle for the exposition of the author's perceptions and she cannot be ignored or lumped together with other minor characters. The woman here plays an important role, sometimes passively and at times aggressively, in a believable network of family, religion and society leading to relatively normal codes of behaviour and discourse and following recognised patterns of growth, courtship and transfer of power from one generation to another. The woman, whether she is the active feminine or the passive, has her own place, her own corner of acceptance in the Malgudian setting with its sense of place, social interaction and interior consciousness.<sup>16</sup>

### Deceptive Comedy

The palpable Malgudi bears upon us as more than a peripheral contingency. It is a complex, defining set of forces, that Krishnan, the English teacher calls 'the law of life', that dictates the quality and direction of his cell. The surroundings of Savithri in *The Dark Room* and her fellow victims speak all too eloquently of what can and what cannot be done. The surface reality is presented with a good deal of jollity, a great amount of affectionate amusement so that the reader goes back, again and again, finding differing sources of enlightenment

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16. Albert Coole, 'The Specialising Sensibility', *The Meaning of Fiction* (Detroit : Wayne State University Press, 1960), pp. 113-133. He points out how the old romances and epics were used to build upon the description of prototypes and archetypes of tradition while the modern novel develops from its own characteristic sense of place, social interaction and interior consciousness.



tries to corroborate this. According to him, Narayan's irony is one of cognition, not correction; "The naivete of being human is the daring subject of this decidedly self-effacing writer."<sup>19</sup>

Narayan is all this and more. He does not overtly condemn or praise any issue, any character, male or female. But the obvious moral lesson, hidden behind the comic veneer is there—Life is but a nightmare comedy, that the law of life cannot be avoided. The law, while telling us about the mixedness of life, of joy and sorrow, also informs us about the significance of acceptance, of resignation to fate, *Karma*, or call it what we will. Chandran has to accept the dictates of his parents and his society to rediscover his resources of love in *The Bachelor of Arts*. His bumbling and stumbling throughout the novel, in order to arrive at what he terms the freedom from 'distracting illusions and hysterics', is comic with an undertone of sadness. The romantic minded high spirited youth ends up totally disillusioned after the failure of the match with Malathi. Now he feels that 'people married because their sexual appetite had to be satisfied and there must be somebody to manage the house!'<sup>20</sup> There is no pot of love at the end of life's rainbow. This surely is not simple comedy. It is a brutal tearing apart of the veil of illusion and the harsh glare of reality which hurts the reader as much as Chandran.

In *The English Teacher*, Krishnan, struggling towards transcendental harmony, does not present a comic picture either. The little child left motherless, brings but a wistful joy to him. He has to be guided by his dead wife's spirit towards a higher peace. The rude vilanous antics of Ramani the brutal husband in *The Dark Room*, especially when he is snubbed and let down by Shanta Bai do amuse us; but they do not completely mask

19. William Walsh, *Readings in Commonwealth Literature*, p. 55. See also William Walsh, 'Sweet Mangoes and Malt Vinegar: The Novels of R.K. Narayan' in *A Human Idiom: Literature and Humanity* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1962), pp. 128-132.

20. Narayan, *The Bachelor of Arts* (East Lansing: The Michigan State University Press, 1954), p. 123.

the pathetic plight of Savithri, who is neither wife, nor woman under his thumb. Margayya takes the ironic twist in his life with admirable equanimity in the novel, *The Financial Expert*. The very pursuit of money which began under the banyan tree and led him to misery and untold mental anxiety proves cyclical—he is back with his box under the familiar tree. This is a comic but a disturbing picture. Similarly, Raju the tourist guide, Rosie, the dancer and Daisy, the dedicated population control officer, have elements of the comic genius in them. But the comedy they present stops at the surface level. Together they inform us about the tragedy of the human situation and that Narayan is fully aware of this tragedy. His apparent serenity, his comic flashes are but deceptive—they mask the nightmare quality of life, the brutality that ordinary human beings, men and women, have to accept and endure.

Junichiro Tanizaki, the Japanese novelist, puts it in this way: "There are undercurrents of self contradiction, doubts and antagonisms which create psychological and social implications that render the serenity of the family and the happiness of the individual deceptive."<sup>21</sup> Narayan effectively hides life's sad truths behind Malgudi's little ironies and knots of satiric circumstance and accidents arising from mischance and misdirection. He is aided in this by his attitude of detachment. He is neither an intolerant critic nor a relentless defender of the Indian way of living. He is not a satirist who sets out to resolve an issue with finality. He does not present a full-blooded attack on any controversy. He presents both sides of the issue in a refined and calm manner and lets them contend for supremacy. Often the victory of the one over the other is not in sight for art, being true to life, does not deal in clearcut victories. The issue of the woman, the woman torn between her career and her home, between her needs of nurturance and autonomy, between her pull towards modernity and her bias in favour of tradition and superstition—all these are present in Narayan's fiction.

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21. See Takashi Kayama, "Changing Family Structure in Japanese Culture, Its Development and Characteristics" and R. Beardsley (Chicago: Chicago Univ.



When he presents a situation, a character, it is teeming with alternate possibilities. But this does not disturb his own inner core of equanimity. The double pulls that the protagonist is subject to leave the author unruffled with his inner core of equilibrium. The tone is not disturbing ; it is soothing and well balanced. What John Updike calls 'his impish sense of conservatism, is really his typically Indian attitude of acceptance and endurance.'<sup>22</sup> He invariably opts for the *status quo*. Like Sammler in Saul Bellow's *Sammler's Planet*, he points out the advantages of a tradition and that all that is modern need not necessarily be good. Says Keith Garebian :

Where the placeless writer can reach a hand only to the cobwebs of those corners of the world he rejects, Narayan can reach out to the themes of literature and touch them with a hand gloved in the fabric of his country, his own, his corner of acceptance.<sup>23</sup>

### **'India will go on'**

When he expresses his belief in the continuity of India, he means his belief in the Indian spiritual continuity and coherence.<sup>24</sup> *Malgudi* is remarkable not because of its physical characteristics—it could be any little town anywhere in the world—but because it projects successfully the author's sense of the continuing spiritual coherence of India. No foreigner could succeed in breaking up the special bond between the Indian, his land and his gods. According to Narayan, in so far as the myth of possession is plausible in a world of *Maya*, it is India that possesses everybody. We see evidence of this in many of his novels. It is Mali with his new fangled theories and Grace who have to retreat in the face of inexorable India epitomised by Jagan in *The Vendor of Sweets*. The novelist makes his protagonist see that wisdom and strength lie in accep-

22. John Updike, rev. of *The Painter of Signs* by R.K. Narayan, *The New Yorker* (5 July, 1976), p. 81.

23. Keith Garebian, "The Spirit of Place in R.K. Narayan", *World Literature Written in English* (November, 1975), p. 298.

24. Naipaul, *India : A Wounded Civilization*, p. 18.

tance and endurance, not rebellion and the fireworks of frustration and impatience.

The Vedas and Dharmashastras have laid down a set of rules, the observance of which results in the maintenance and well being of a social order with fixed castes and sub-castes and their allotted duties. Each individual, male or female, is expected to play his role according to a time honoured set of rules, appropriate to the family and the caste in which he is born. He has a well defined, a codified area of operation for leading a normal life. Within this predetermined circle, he has to find his corner of acceptance. What is true for the man holds good for the woman too, even more so, circumscribed as she is by so many factors. Narayan points out how misery and disruption result everytime the circle of conformity, of acceptance, is transgressed. Cynthia, the typical Western girl, in Rajan's *The Dark Dancer* expressed this succinctly : "There is nothing that you decide or choose. All you do is accept and try to make a room you can live in between the corners of acceptance."<sup>25</sup> Narayan's literary mythology rests on the traditional cornerstone of acceptance.

### **Life as a lila : the Hindu response**

In the name of order, of balance, of conformity, of existence and of survival, rebellion is suppressed. What is promoted is an unquestioning acceptance of traditional norms. This is at times disturbing and increasingly difficult for the protagonist, male or female, to accept fully. One recalls Naipaul's comment on Narayan :

To get down to Narayan's world, to perceive the order and continuity he saw in the dereliction and smallness of India, to enter into his ironic acceptance and relish his comedy, was to ignore too much of what could be seen, to shed too much of myself : my sense of history, and even the simplest ideas of human possibility. I did not lose my admiration for Narayan ; but I felt that his

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25. Balachandra Rajan, *The Dark Dancer* (New York : Simon and Schuster, 1958), pp. 125-126.

or comedy and irony were not quite what they had appeared to be. were part of a Hindu response to the world, a response I could no longer share.<sup>26</sup>

He goes on to add that he feels these novels are not "social comedies" with their "delight in human oddity" but "religious fables and intensely Hindu."<sup>27</sup>

Srinivas in *Mr. Sampat* expounds this philosophy of quietism of acceptance clearly. He is like Camus in pointing out the futility of rebellion: "Life and the world and all this is passing—why bother about anything? The perfect and the imperfect are all the same. Why really bother?" It is a tacit acceptance of distress as the condition of men and women. Life is a *Maya* play, as Raja Rao had stated in *The Stryker and the Boy*. Narayan reaffirms it with a comic veneer.

This does not mean that Narayan does not sympathise with the individual who is on the edge of the knowledge of abyss where even identity becomes an aspect of *Karma*, where non-doing and non-interference becomes virtues. But Narayan views his protagonists with affectionate amusement, secure in his Olympian heights, secure in his acceptance of *Karma*, the Hindu opiate which dictates payment and punishment for the sins of the past and present lives in lives to come.<sup>28</sup>

It is sad and ironic that an individual like Chandran or Krishnan or Margayya or Ramen (take their female counterparts like Ambika, Rosy, Savitri and Daisy too) has a stomach and a soap: the very norms that he has been battling against all along. The given social co-ordinates being irreversible, he/she accepts the philosophy of defeat.

There is no hint of any break with Hindu tradition here.

26. Nairpaul, *India: A Wounded Civilization*, p. 51.

27. Narayan, *Mr. Sampat* (Mysore: Indian Thought, 1956), pp. 200-201.

28. See S. Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life* (London: O.V.P., 1957) for the average Indian's views on life, religion and philosophy. Also see Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *The Crest of the Peacock* (Bombay: Jaico, 1978), pp. 157-174.

It is a full endorsement of the view that life is but a *lila* or a play, a part of a contingent, transient process, of little value. Srinivas in his vision of 'the multitudinousness and vastness of the whole picture of life' states the author's view : "Madness or sanity, suffering or happiness seemed all the same...in the rush of eternity nothing mattered... Even madness passes...only existence asserts itself."<sup>29</sup>

Jagan's retreat and renunciation, Savithri's submission to a position which is nefarious to her dignity as a human being, Rosy's succumbing to the inexorable *Karma*, Daisy's unachieved domestic bliss and doomed spinsterhood are the direct results of the acceptance of these doctrines. Where *Karma* and *Maya* are operative, where 'thing being neither particularly wrong nor right, but are just balancing themselves', there is no need for rebellion, no need for freedom to express outrage. Why rebel if we feel certain that this life is transient, that there is a higher life to come? Why rebel if everything is just and balanced, if our present distress is the result of past *Karma*, if everything we see and feel is but part of a great cycle of births and deaths? Why rebel about male dominance and female subjugation? What is needed is to remind oneself constantly that everything is part of the Hindu response, a reminder of our duty to ourselves and to our lives to come. We have to concur with the Crank's message in *The Painter of Signs* : 'This will pass'.

### **This will pass**

The few instances where the individual tries to break with tradition, with the accepted beliefs and ways of living, bring but unhappiness to him/her. Raman tries hard to conform to traditional concepts like marriage and setting up a household while simultaneously trying to accept the radical view of Daisy who throws overboard every known concept of religion and society. The result is a waste of two lives, two human beings whose abundant store of love, vitality and happiness could have

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29. Narayan, *Mr. Sampath*, p. 201.

transient phenomena and espouses a religion of inaction of non-doing, of non-interference. This explains the abysmal depths to which an average Indian, more often a female than a male, can sink into and remain quite apathetic about it. Growth is often precluded in the sense that growth would mean investigation and progression instead of passive conformity. By preaching the virtue of inaction, the Indian tends to become parasitic—he tends to live on or around the activities of others. This becomes a natural order of things to the homebound woman—in her we see the corruption of the tenets of Hinduism. The wives of Srinivas, Sampath, Margayya, Jagan and many others illustrate this with varying degrees of accuracy.

### From Schoolboy to Sign Painter

Srinivasa Iyengar states that the characters in Narayan's novels seem to achieve a sort of transmigration 'from body to body, name to name and ultimately to blur the sharpness of the distinctions under the haze of a general acceptance.'<sup>32</sup> While this may be true in the case of a few, it is not generally applicable to the characters, male and female, that we encounter in the novels.

While Swami, the average schoolboy in *Swami and Friends* can be safely assumed to have grown up into Chandran in *The Bachelor of Arts* and later metamorphosed into Krishnan in *The English Teacher*, Ramani, the callous blustering husband in *The Dark Room* and Vasu the equally villainous taxidermist in *The Man Eater of Malgudi*, do not fall into the same category. Nor do the others run true to type. Sriram, the callous youth transformed by his devotion to the Mahatma in *Waiting for the Mahatma*, Srinivas, the idealistic journalist and Sampath, the versatile printer in *Mr. Sampath*, Margayya, the financial wizard in *The Financial Expert*, Raju, the quicksilver jack of all trades in *The Guide*, and Raman, the urbane, suave bachelor in *The Painter of Signs* are as varied as they come. They are fully rounded, believable characterizations and hence complex, lend-

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32. See Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English*, p. 363.

ing themselves to layers of interpretation, dependent only on the reader's perspicacity.

While it is facile to group, as Srinivas Iyengar does, Susceela of *The English Teacher*, Brinda of *The Financial Expert* and Bharathi of *Waiting for the Mahatma*, as variations on the theme of Indian girlhood, it is difficult to agree to the clumping together of Shanta Bai of *The Dark Room*, Rosie of *The Guide*, and Shanta of *Mr. Sampath* as kindered souls. One is a vamp, the other an artist who loves dancing and the third, part actress and part pathetic widow. They are as varied and complex as the male protagonists, often even more complex. The older traditional women are deep and serve as repositories of routine culture and sufficiency with deadly efficiency. The younger are more radical like Rosie and Daisy, creating explosive alternative patterns of behaviour, paving the way for rebellion against the prevalent exploitative situation; however, futile such confrontations turn out to be, the important fact is that they feel free now to express their sense of outrage, each in her own individualistic manner.

The author, for all his settled inner equanimity is true to his craft—true enough to portray the double pulls that the Indian woman is subject to; she is torn between tradition and modernity, between Indian and Western values and ways of living, between her dignity as a human being and her duty as daughter, wife and mother, between marrying for love and marrying for the family, between her desire for autonomy and her need for nurturance. In each case she tries to settle finally for a compromise, however, heart breaking it may be, with the fervent hope that it would be operable given the rigid social co-ordinates. The author lets us feel that resignation and acceptance come naturally to the maturer, wiser man/woman leading him/her to inner harmony.

### **Meaningful Engagement with Life**

Among the novels written before 1950. *The Bachelor of Arts*, *The Dark Room* and *The English Teacher* are significant for

the purposes of this study. Narayan's goal is complete detachment from the transitory and acceptance of the inevitable: he, however, points out that detachment and acceptance to be meaningful, to be lasting, must follow after a meaningful engagement with life, with the living. Running away is premature and futile as in the case of Chandran in *The Bachelor of Arts*.

Chandran, growing up from callous youth into responsible adulthood, must know what he is giving up in becoming a sadhu, a hermit and what he is accepting in order that his detachment becomes meaningful. What is interesting in the process is his falling in love and the clashes this invokes with a conservative family and an equally tradition bound society. Laments Nirad Chaudhuri: "The Hindus who were probably the most uninhibited people in regard to matters of sex, are, to-day, the most inhibited and taboo-ridden."<sup>33</sup>

Chandran's dilemma is the extension of the hero's plight in the short story *The White Flower*.<sup>34</sup> He falls in love with a young girl on the banks of the Sarayu. By 'falling in love' is not meant the currency of catchwords like 'boyfriend', 'girlfriend' and 'dating', our social life being such as to give the girl and the boy no opportunity to fall in love wisely and marry happily. It may be argued that the Indian society has changed, that there is greater freedom, more mixing of the sexes, more co-education and co-working in offices as a result of the impact of the West—granted these changes are there, they are but on the surface. At a deeper level the traditional concepts are constantly being reaffirmed by the pattern of particular lives. Narayan constantly draws upon the sanctions of traditional morality while at the same time he is precise and subtle in his realisation of individuality and idiosyncrasy."

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33. Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *To Live or Not to Live* (New Delhi: Orient, 1970.)

34. Narayan, "The White Flower", in *Lawley Road* (Mysore: Indian Thought, 1956), pp. 77-79. This short story contains in miniature the plot of *The Bachelor of Arts*.

Chandran, seeing a fifteen year old girl on the Sarayu sands, is smitten with love at first sight, as only a twenty year old could be. Fresh from college, he is hopelessly and idealistically in love with this girl, Malathi. He does not have a meeting or direct contact with her, hampered as he is by the custom of arranged marriage and the strict codes concerning social intercourse in the case of young people of marriageable age. His imagination, however, fills in the gaps and through intermediaries he learns her name and her caste status. He gives vent to his fear : "Suppose, though unmarried, she belonged to some other caste ? A marriage would not be tolerated even between subjects of the same caste." And then he imagines, in the bravado engendered by youthful love, that he would marry her and pave the way for social reform : "If India was to attain salvation, these watertight divisions must go—community, caste, sect, sub-sects and still further divisions. He felt very indignant. He would set an example himself by marrying this girl whatever her caste or sect might be."

Fortunately the girl comes from the right caste and the matchmaker, Ganapathi, brings in information about her parents and family background, the probable dowry to be offered, the details of the horoscope. Chandran, however, is baffled when the marriage arrangements come to a stop. The father of the girl tells them bluntly that the marriage cannot take place—the position of Mars in Chandran's horoscope in fatal conjuncture with Malathi's horoscope would kill the wife soon after the marriage. Malathi is married to someone else and the disillusioned heart broken lover leaves for Madras. The attempt at a compromise between the arranged and romantic love does not come through successfully.

There is irony not only in the incompatibility of the horoscopes but also in Chandran himself. Chandran, though he may be the romantic lover, though he may rebel against the system, has been conditioned by the self same system, more than he acknowledges, more than he is aware of. He never got to know the girl he loved, he was as shy and naive as any



other youngster his age would be and his sexual innocence and lack of confidence in love affairs is typical of his age, and his times. That his parents approve or arrange another marriage for him soon after his return and that this time it goes through smoothly is also a typical phenomenon.

The novel ends on a true-to-life-note with Chandran finding anew the resources of love in the conventional setting and welcoming his new obligations as a householder. His cynical attitude as a *sanyasi* which made him state that 'Love is only a brain affection ; it led me to beg and cheat ; to desert my parents ; it is responsible for my mother's extra wrinkles and grey hairs, and for my father's neglect of the garden...' is totally submerged when he goes for the bridal inspection. Narayan whimsically points out that renunciation here has been immature and skin deep. Chandran is still the romantic lover looking forward to marital bliss : "He saw her face now. It was divine ; there was no doubt about it. He secretly compared it with Malathi's and wondered what he had seen in the latter to drive him so mad...."<sup>35</sup> He has accepted the pattern followed by his forefathers. Marry and then love is the practice and Chandran commits himself to the normal satisfactions of conjugal love. However, irrational it may appear, arranged marriages often work satisfactorily in India.

This is Narayan's treatment of calf love. Love or the process of falling in love appears to the Indian adult largely sub-rational or supra rational. Now skin deep and capricious an emotion love can be is demonstrated in the case of Chandran. Theoretically, most Indians who often fall in love, after marrying, would say that love is an essential requisite for happiness in married life. Yet when they come to analyse the impulses that attract a man and a woman, they find most of them to be abstract, not capable of concretisation. It is difficult to explain it in terms of the intellect. The other side of the coin, of the woman falling in love, of how the woman feels when she is led in like a cow for a bridal inspection and

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35. Narayan, *The Bachelor of Arts*, pp. 59, 61.

what she feels about love's place in her life, is given through Daisy in *The Painter of Signs*.<sup>36</sup>

### The Happy Householder

Krishnan in *The English Teacher* takes off from where Chandran left us. If Swami and Chandran signify the first stage of life, namely the student-celibate, then Krishnan epitomises the second stage or asrama of the householder, Krishnan, his wife Suseela and their little daughter Leela constitute a harmonious household, a paeon to wedded bliss. Srinivasa Iyengar is eloquent in his praise :

The story of their wedded life is a prose lyric on which Narayan has lavished his best gifts as a writer. Spring is no hard material substance : it is a presence, it is an unfolding, it is ineffable becoming that strains after Being. A thousand little occurrences leaps of light, bubbles of sound, a thousand smiles revealing their rainbow magnificence through the film of tearful happiness or fulfilment, a thousand murmurs of ecstasy, meaningless worries, tremendous trifles, a thousand stabs of pain that are somehow transcended, a thousand shared anxieties, excitements and adorations : it is out of these that the texture of wedded happiness is wrought and Narayan is an adept at giving form and meaning to this glory of holy wedded love. Quotation is difficult because the perfume is nowhere concentrated but fills the entire atmosphere.<sup>37</sup>

This is the only instance of a fully eventuated harmonious wedded relationship, albeit short lived (cut short by Suseela's premature death from typhoid) that one recalls in Narayan's novels. The latter half of the book moves on to unfamiliar

36. Chaudhuri, 'Family Life', Part II, *To Live or Not to Live*, pp. 94-203. He deals with the joint-family, working women, marriage in Hindu society, the unitary family and the impact of westernisation on Hindu family life.

37. Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English*, p. 367. Almost all Narayan's novels have quiet touches of authenticity in them. See for further corroboration, Narayan, *My Dad's Diary* (Myerson: Indian Thought, 1960) and also Narayan, *My Days: A Memoir* (New York : The Viking Press, 1974).

grounds of psychic phenomena. The bereaved husband, disconsolate in his grief, tries to communicate with his dead wife through a psychic medium. After repeated attempts, he succeeds at last in capturing that inner harmony of souls, the transcendental peace that is beyond the barriers of life and death : "The boundaries of our personalities suddenly dissolved. It was a moment of rare, immutable joy—a moment for which one feels grateful to Life and Death."<sup>38</sup>

The heroine in the first half of the novel is the charming girl—wife who tries to run a household on a narrow budget, makes plans about their future, dreams about a house to be built and her daughter's marriage. She is the picture of a warm, appealing woman who epitomises the best in Indian womanhood. Krishnan, her husband, grows along with her in love and understanding and learns life anew with her, his partner in life, *sahadharmini*.

The little community of love, sustained and nurtured by one and all shows how beautifully the traditional marital set-up could work given the proper conditions and partners. Everyone, young or old, including little Leela, does his/her share towards keeping the home life alive and warm. Tradition here does not seem restrictive but protective, nourishing, and all embracing with affection. It is an emblem of the promise of happiness that human society holds out to rational and well balanced couples in married life.

The agony during the prolonged illness, the journey to the cremation ground and the grief of the parents and the husband are vividly depicted and ring true. Suseela, however, undergoes a metamorphosis after her death. The believable and charming housewife turns into a spirit and undertakes the task of guiding Krishnan through his maze of grief and apathy to a higher harmony of the souls beyond life and death. In this, she fulfils the classical concept of womanhood.<sup>39</sup> The novel

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38. Narayan, *The English Teacher*, p. 200.

39. There are numerous classical texts which deal with Indian womanhood. Among them the more well known and significant are the following :

Hindu wife has to adjust to the immense psychological demands placed on her. She has to conform to the concept embodied in the famous *sloka* :

‘*Grihini, sachivah, sakhi, mithah*  
*Priya-shishyalalite kala vidhu.*’<sup>39</sup>

The classical Hindu wife has to be the wife, the counsellor, the playmate, the partner, the guide, the beloved, the disciple and learned, enough in fine arts to teach her husband. Susela, after death, in conforming to this classical concept, loses her appealing human warmth; the loss perhaps in the result of bowing down to the exigencies of the plot. In a matter of hours, she turns into what S.C. Harrex calls ‘an animated philosophical treatise’ and Shirley Chew, ‘pedantry in the spirit.’<sup>41</sup>

She takes Krishnan’s spiritual development in her hand teaches him about the psychic medium of existence, enables him to have spiritual sight and guides him towards the higher knowledge of the soul. At novel’s end, thanks to her help, he learns to accept the inevitable dissolution of human ties and the souls beyond the physical realm. In the process, like any other classical, spiritual heroine she becomes remote. The psychic experience is intensely personal and Susela, in the spirit, is too perfect, devoid of any appealing human flaw.

We remember her best as an ordinary young woman representative of a given class, of a given social and religious context, who learns to cope by trial and error with the common vicissitudes of life in her daily living. To be sure, she is luckier than most girls of her age and her class; her family is suppor-

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39 (Cold)

Bharatha’s *Natya Sastra*, Dhananjaya’s *Dasa Rupaka*, Panditaraja Jagannatha’s *Bhamini Vilasa*, Raja Bhoja’s *Samarangana Sutra* Dhara, Someswara’s *Manollasa*, Varahamihira’s *Brihat Samhita* and last but not the least, Vatsyayana’s *Kama Sutra*.

40. Chaudhury, *To Live or Not To Live*, p. 118.

41. S.C. Harrex, *The Fire and the Offering*, p. 81. and Shirley Chew, ‘A Proper Detachment : The Novels of R.K. Narayan’, p. 155.

tive unlike most Hindu joint families which, though not inhuman are usually unhuman, where, often, the merging of the personalities of the husband and wife in love and companionship is absent, where marriages tend to degenerate into business partnerships or continuous forms of well regulated animal courtship. Her life, on the contrary, is almost idyllic with loving parents and parents-in-law, a devoted darling of a daughter, enough material amenities to make life pleasant though not luxurious, and above all, and affectionate, accommodative and enlightened husband. She is the gentle mistress of her household, a sort of Eve in the Garden of Eden before the Fall. She is thrice blessed indeed for she has the love of her family, her child and her husband. Because she loves intensely, all around her is lovable and even her little tiffs with Krishnan are full of poetry.

On their last outing, the husband and the wife visit a temple. The husband, protective in his love, as ever, prays : "God bless this child and protect her." The revelation of the nurturant, protective aspect, the 'husbanding' of a woman, in all its tenderness, is endearing. Both being emotionally well balanced, they are not inhibited—he in displaying his protective side, she in accepting it gracefully. Suseela is a remarkable heroine in Indian fiction, credible enough to be the girl next door whom everybody would love.

### **A Study in Domestic Disharmony**

From the psychic plane, we come down, in *The Dark Room*, to the predictable woes of ordinary domestic life in a male dominated social structure. Though dealing with the same stage (*asrama*), it is poles apart from *The English Teacher* in its treatment of Indian married life. After fifteen years of marriage and three children, the protagonists, Ramani and Savithri, portray a marriage in crisis, a marriage that, despite its deceptive surface tranquility, is beset deep within by discord. Ramani is everything that a husband should not be—he is a cruder Helmer to a gentler Nora. The fact that he provides for the household, he feels, makes him lord and master of all

he surveys at home. He is part blustering buffon (when he is with his liaison dangerous, Shanta Bai) and part crude villain (when in the company of his sensitive, meek and timid wife, Savithri). Confronted by his aggressive, selfish, callous, philanthropic attitude, Savithri is cowed down, unhappy and frustrated.

Ramani believes in separate codes for men and women, separate codes for wife and mistress : "Of course", he granted, "there was some sense in the women's movement : let them by all means, read English novels, play tennis, have their All-India Conference and go to the pictures occasionally ; but that should not blind them to their primary duties of being wives and mothers ; they mustn't attempt to ape the Western women, all of whom, according to Ramani's belief, lived in a chaos of promiscuity and divorce. He held that India owed its spiritual eminence to the fact that the people here realised that a woman's primary duty (also a divine privilege) was being a wife and a mother, and what woman retained the right of being called a wife who disobeyed her husband ? Didn't all the ancient epics and Scriptures enjoin upon the woman, the strictest identification with her husband ? He remembered all the heroines of the epics whose one dominant quality was a blind stubborn following of their husbands, like the shadow following the substance."<sup>42</sup>

Ramani's insistence on Savithri's subservience to him inflates his ego. It is ironical that he runs after Shanta Bai for promiscuous pleasures, all the while praising to the skies the glories of traditional Indian womanhood. The social code that had been equitable in *The English Teacher* has been turned into something that is degrading to the woman here. Narayan's idea is that there is nothing inherently wrong or right in tradition—only the humans like Ramani or Vasu or Krishnan make it so. Ramani here symbolises the common male attitude that is largely prevalent, even now, in varying degrees of accuracy, more so in the rural areas, despite the disclaimers of critics.

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42. Narayan, *The Dark Room*, pp. 92-93.

Savithri is a symbol of the artist's concern with the individual humanity of man. She impels us towards a discussion of the extant Hindu values regarding the proper relationship between the partners in married life, between one sensitive human being to another in a tradition bound society. Narayan's portrayals of women are to a great extent, attempts at establishing human values, in an insensitive age, within the existing background of Hindu metaphysics.

Faced with his constant bullying in the house, Savithri has no other recourse except to sulk in the dark room in the house. The dark room, though fast disappearing from Indian households nowadays, served a multiplicity of purposes in older times, as a place of retreat, a storehouse for valuables, a pantry, a trysting place for newly weds in the joint family and so on. According to S.C. Harrex, the dark room here symbolises "the emotional emptiness and domestic claustrophobia which can result from a circumscribed marital orthodoxy."<sup>43</sup>

When Ramani adds philandering with Shanta Bai, his pretty vamp of a colleague in his office, to the long list of petty tyrannies, Savithri feels desperate enough to think of suicide. She is a pathetic figure, not the symbol of purity and growth that Ramani speaks of but of insecurity, isolation, fear and vulnerability. While Suscela serves as an agent of romantic sensibility, Savithri is the agent for the author's quest for psychological insight and awareness of the plight of the unfortunate Indian woman who has neither the strength of will nor the economic and educational opportunities to withstand unfair male aggression.

The reader is aware of Savithri's shortcomings—her emotional instability, her lack of confidence, her excessive fear, her love for seemliness, for order which makes her obey conventions even though they stifle her, her strong sense of duty towards others which makes her forget her obligation towards her self and her opting for the *status quo* and the line of least resistance..

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43. Harrex, *The Fire and the Offering*, p. 69.

Witness her feeling ashamed about her sulking in the dark room when her elderly neighbour Janamma tells her "I have never opposed my husband or argued with him at any time in my life. I might have occasionally suggested an alternative but nothing more. What he does is right. It is a wife's duty to feel so."<sup>44</sup>

However, one feels kinship with Savithri and not with her bullying husband. Narayan views his heroine with gentle irony and lightly disguised compassion. He does not sentimentalise nor take sides in the issue, nor does he moralise on the right or wrong aspect of her behaviour. Having borne patiently domestic injustice for years, she feels distraught over his liaison with another woman and she makes an impulsive, last-minute stand like Ibsen's Nora. The only moment she acts decisively is impulsive, a gross miscalculation, leading to consequences which prove disastrous to her.

She asks : "Will you promise not to go near her again?" Then her ultimatum, "You are not having me and her at the same time, understand? I shall go out of this house this minute." Meets with his laconic "You can please yourself. Put out the light. I want to sleep."

Poor Savithri is so enraged to her vitals that she cries out : "You are dirty, you are impure. Even if I burn my skin, I can't cleanse myself of the impurity of your touch.... Do you think I will stay in your house, breathe the air of your property, drink the water here, and eat food you buy with your money? No. I'll starve and die in the open, under the sky—a roof for which we need be obliged to no man."

Realisation of her helplessness hits her. "I don't possess anything in this world. What possession can a woman call her own except her body? Everything else that she has is her father's, her husband's or her son's." When Ramani claims the children as his own, she breaks down "Yes, you are right. They are yours, absolutely. You paid the midwife

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44. Narayan, *The Dark Room*, p. 42.



and the nurse. You pay for their clothes and teachers. You are right. Didn't I say that a woman owns nothing?" The mother in her tugs her heart strings and she sobs: "What will they do without me?" Ramani has his answer ready: "They will get on splendidly without you, don't you worry. No one is indispensable in this world."

When he shuts the door, Savithri is on her way to drown herself in the Sarayu. She is still amazed at her rebellion: "Am I the same old Savithri or am I someone else? Perhaps this is just a dream. And I must be someone else posing as Savithri because I couldn't have had the courage to talk back to my husband. I have never done it in my life."<sup>45</sup>

She cannot sustain her heroic stance against overwhelming odds "No one who could not live by herself should be allowed to exist. If I take the train and go to my parents, I shall feed on my father's pension; if I go back home, I shall be living on my husband's earnings, and later, on Babu. What can I do by myself? Unfit to earn a handful of rice except by begging. If I had gone to a college and studied, I might have become a teacher or something. It was very foolish of me not to have gone on with my education. Sumati and Kamala must study up to the B.A. and not depend on marriage for their salvation. What is the difference between a prostitute and a married woman? The prostitute changes her men but a married woman doesn't, that's all; but both earn their food and shelter in the same manner."<sup>46</sup>

She ends her musings on by stepping into the river and is nearly drowned; she is saved by Mari, the village blacksmith who doubles as a petty thief by night. Her newly awakened pride as a human being would not let her accept charity, even from such amiable friends as Mari and Ponni. Since she could not live with nothing in her stomach and the sky as the roof, and since she wouldn't impose upon her friends, the three:

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45. Narayan, *The Dark Room*, p. 77.

46. Narayan, *The Dark Room*, p. 80.

go about searching for a job which proves to be futile. Savithri, like thousands of other middle-class girls, in her country, finds herself totally untrained for any career other than marriage and hence unemployable in anything else in life.

The village temple in Sukkur nearby offers her succour. The priest gives her the menial task of sweeping and cleaning the temple premises in return for a measure of rice and a pinch of salt a day. What is implied here is the third stage in life, *Vanaprasthasrama*, the retreat from worldly life for ascetic meditation in the forests. Poor Savithri is unprepared for this and hence her renunciation is immature, and her acceptance is hard to come by. She is barely able to last out a day or two. She misses her home, her household comforts, and above all, her children. She pockets her pride and returns home, thoroughly deflated and humiliated, prepared to accept the *status quo*, to accept life with its Ramani and Shanta Bai.

Her rebellion is all too brief. It is a commentary on the power of social indoctrination and of traditional attitudes of acceptance, of inaction, of bowing down to *Karma*. In returning of Ramani, she submits to the conventional whips of tyranny and injustice which induce fear. Not that she is unaware of it. She laments: "One definite thing in life is Fear. Fear, from the cradle to the funeral pyre, and even beyond that, fear of torture in the other world. Afraid of a husband's displeasures, and of the discomforts that might be caused to him, morning to night and all night too... Afraid of one's father, teachers and everybody in early life, afraid of one's husband, children and neighbours in later life—fear, fear in one's heart till the funeral pyre is lit and then fear of being sentenced by *Tama* to be held down in a cauldron of boiling oil."<sup>47</sup>

Savithri is fully aware that her dignity as a woman, as a human being has been traded in for a life of placid domesticity. She knows that, by succumbing to the *status quo* which includes Ramani's petty tyrannies and Shanta Bai's flirtation,

47. Narayan, *The Dark Room*, pp. 77-8.

non-Indian concept, like the old grandmother in Santha Rama Rau's *Remember the House*. The liaison with Santa Bai does not lead to the resolution of the conventional lover's triangle. Both Savithri and Shanta Bai would co-exist, the one in the house boosting up his ego, the other in the office, bruising it. Life would go on very much as before. Major emotional changes and radical readjustments between husband and wife are unlikely in the Indian home. Everything has its own pace and even slight changes on the social veneer would take their time to be felt and appreciated.

However, having enlisted the reader's sympathy towards Savithri, Narayan seems to plead for a better deal and more sympathy and understanding for the Indian housewife. By picturing idyllic wedded happiness in *The English Teacher* he had pointed out the need for reinterpretation of the traditional precept of wifely subservience as an enlightened companionable approach to life as equal partners. This is, no doubt, a difficult task, given the double pulls of contending social phenomena, given the Sarutian, strife torn marital set up where each partner either possesses or else is possessed by the other.

Towards the novel's end there are glimpses of less accessible and less acceptable modes of resilience and awareness behind Savithri's placid return to the fold. Even in her defeat she is moving and real. Her rebellion though futile, though not as radical, as that of other fictive heroines, is remarkable in the sense it gave her an alternative patterning of her way of living, although brief. What is more significant is the fact that it gave her a way of an escape in her imagination, a way out of an exploitative world. Cowed down and humbled as she is, she still is not the same old Savithri. Her new awareness would enable her to see that her daughters at least do not fall into the same sand trap when they grow up.

She starts exhibiting her mental courage in small doses, in minor instances. She does not, we gather, rush as before to fulfil every bellow and whimper of Ramani. When the car turns in at the gate, with its usual musical note, she does not



judices imposed and nurtured by a puritanical society. They dramatize with deadly routine and efficiency the harsh reality of the human condition: What is inexorable is right. They aim to achieve, however briefly and brokenly, the sense of having lived. They develop an awareness of love and respect through their very absence and negation.

It can be argued that such passivity, such docility, could be deceptive, could be misleading. According to Professor William Walsh, the women represent 'Custom and Reason', and 'know what is and what is not proper.'<sup>50</sup> This is, no doubt, a source of power in a tradition bound group oriented society. However, when feminine consciousness is awakened, she is longer content with indirect power. She is not satisfied with a state of affairs which lets her create in man the qualities she desires rather than exercising power directly. The active female wishes to exercise volition in thought, sex and imagination. She does not wish to see herself, to achieve through, the eyes of the male.<sup>51</sup>

### Everything an Aspect of Karma

The passive feminine is philosophically prepared for defeat and withdrawal rather than independence and action. She embraces a feminine mystique that turns motherhood into a full time career and stifles all her other ambitions and achievements. Margayya's wife lives for the sake of her son Balu, the

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50. William Walsh, 'Nataraja and the Packet of Saffron' in *Readings from Commonwealth Literature*, p. 54.

51. The confrontation between the active and the passive feminine, the female's resentment at having to achieve, to see herself through the eyes of the male, the 'other', the modern woman's attempts to break the binding spells of feminine myths and models, these are not exclusive to India; they are part of universal phenomena. See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), pp. 15-16. See also Madonna Kolbenschlag, *Kiss Sleeping Beauty Good-bye* (New York: Doubleday, 1979). She uses traditional fairy tales like Snow White, and Cinderella as metaphors of woman's condition and illustrates the need for breaking up these fairy idylls in order to become whole and autonomous beings.

be-all and end-all of her existence. Ambika ascends in status in the joint family after begetting Mali, after a wait of ten long years. She is no longer a non-person : she is the mother of a male child.

The female's virginity and her dowry constitute her passport in the matrimonial derby. Her child bearing potential, especially her potential for bearing male issue is highly valued. She is expected to be an apolitical, non-threatening, neutral being devoted exclusively to maintenance, who would eschew outside interests and work in favour of the family and the children.<sup>52</sup>

Margayya's wife in *The Financial Expert* epitomises an isolated trapped psyche at the mercy of an unsympathetic and actively cruel environment, a society that is maddened by the pursuit of material progress. The degradations involved for a girl of ability and painful sensibility, so aptly demonstrated by Savithri, are continued in her case and that of the wives of Srinivas, the journalist and Sampath, the printer in *Mr. Sampath*. Life claims them, uses them up and they end up as dried and hung up applied tools like the Jamesian heroine Isabel in *The Portrait of a Lady*.

The passive female is not an unmixed blessing for the male. Srinivas finds his wife an irksome burden once they are outside the protective coils of the joint family. Her orthodox eating habits (p. 29), her silent accusations, her constant helplessness, her unseemly fear of other people's opinions—all these make her a misfit in his journalistic life. Passivity reduces her to a

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52. Betty Friedan noted in 1963 how women have been cajoled into giving up jobs and vocations in order to find satisfaction as wives and mothers. This resulted in a personal retreat even on the part of the most farsighted, the most spirited : "We lowered our eyes from the horizon and steadily contemplated our own navels", she says. See Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963 ; rpt. New York : Dell, 1974). Also, for a vibrant exploding of the myth of motherhood, see Nancy Pottishman Weiss, "Mother, the Invention of Necessity : Dr. Benjamin Spock's Baby and Child Care", *American Quarterly*, 29 Winter, 1977), pp. 519-46.

nagging robot. He tells us that the hankering for other people's approval, of father, mother, grandmother, parents-in-law, husband, son and so on, grew into a mania in his wife till she had no opportunity to think of her own views on any matter. "She did not want him to get up and go out early in the day lest it should upset the neighbours ; she didn't want to raise her own voice in her own house, lest the neighbours should think of her as a termagant ; she wouldn't send the little fellow out to play with some children in the neighbourhood because they were too ragged ; and there were still others who might think her plebian." (p. 32'.

Srinivas, not being as heartless as most other husbands, has the capacity to feel pity for her. "He viewed her life as it was : a lonely, bare life." (p. 42). Sampath, however, takes his domestic drudge of a wife for granted. He has no qualms about his flirtation with Shanta, the actress, "that little piece of georgette, powder and curves" : he justifies his liaison with great aplomb : "Well, I am going to have different establishments I am doing nothing illegal, to feel apologetic. After all, our religion permits us to marry many wives." (p. 72). Then there is the mother of Ravi, the mad artiste. That she bore so much from a tyrannical husband for over forty years, evokes respect for her from Srinivas. (pp. 203-4).

Such fortitude in the face of tyranny is the norm, however, blighting and futile it is. The passive women in the novels are parasitic. Their quietism which is the end result of *Karma* non-doing and a way of looking at life as an extended religious fable enables them to survive in the face of great distress. They depend on the continuing activity of the male. They need life but they surrender the organization of their lives to the men. Even Shanta, the actress armed with the power of beauty and career is not original. At the crucial moment she takes a step back and retreats into her ordained life as a widowed mother. She flees from the railway station leaving a note to Sampath. She says she is sick of her life as an actress, that a second marriage frightens her, that she is duty bound to look after her son. She turns her worldly defeat into a religious and social response ; everything becomes an aspect of *Karma*.

## That is the Way the World Is

The passive feminine is hooked on sexist stereotypes. She is weak and malleable, the result of cultural conditioning, generation after generation. Margayya's wife—we are told once, her name is Meena—is resigned to her lot in life. The message is clear—she is no more than the sum of services rendered and can be replaced anytime by another. She is the apathetic domestic drudge and not the mentally agile, achievement oriented *sahadharmini* or partner in life one reads about in Vedic literature. Through her apathy, however, gleam her love for her son and her devotion to her money maniac of a husband. Much like Balzac's miser, Margayya lets her toil night and day, even after he becomes the rich banker. "She knew that he viewed money as something to accumulate and not to be spent on increasing one's luxuries in life. She knew all his idioms even before he uttered them." (p. 120) She waits on him patiently night and day, for years and he hardly notices her existence as a human being. She listens to his talk patiently (p. 95), takes her own food after serving him attentively (p. 162), is the picture of old world courteous wifelyhood ever solicitous of his needs, shy in the presence of strangers (p. 106), and never questions father or son. She is the mature being who watches from her corner the crisis brewing between Margayya and their son Balu.

"She pursued what seemed to her the best policy and allowed events to shape themselves. She knew that matters were coming to a conclusion now and she was a helpless witness to a terrific struggle between two positive minded men, for she no longer doubted that the son was a grown-up man." (p. 112)

She watches silently, not wishing to set the one against the other. She is like Srinivas in her belief in non-action, in *Karma*, in non-interference." She understands that the best way to attain some peace of mind in life was to maintain silence; ultimately, she found out that things resolved themselves in the best manner possible or fizzled out." (p. 112). She did not try to correct her husband's excessive emphasis in all



matters. She has a strong sense of duty, of doing one's *Dharma*, the duty pertaining to one's role and status in life. She does not wish to add to the business cares in her husband's life, nor does she take an active role in shaping her son's life. Each goes his own way—Margayya builds up a fortune based on the book, "Bed Life or the Science of Marital Happiness," speculates in investments and has a great fall when he is thwarted by Dr. Pal. Balu wastes his life away in useless pursuits. The whole edifice crumbles down, Margayya is declared a bankrupt. Life goes on in relentless circle, with Margayya and his black box back under the banyan tree. She has not moved an inch. She has accepted the way the world is for the sake of peace. She left everybody alone. "She attained thereby great tranquility in practical everyday life." (p. 113). What had she not lost in the bargain?

### The Seeds of Rebellion

With the shift in authorial sensibility Narayan indicates that the Indian woman who bears passivity as the badge of her tribe cannot be taken for granted any more. In the short story, *The Shelter*<sup>53</sup> he examines the issue of the woman's rebellion in a nutshell. An estranged couple who had parted under similar circumstances as in *The Dark Room* meet accidentally for shelter from a rainstorm under a tree. Anonymous as she is, the lady here is made of sterner stuff than Savithri. She refuses to be her husband's 'toy' to be picked up and thrown away at his will. He having asked her, like Ramani, to get out of the house, begs her now to come back. She, resolute as ever, declines his offer. Nothing can hold her to him, against her will, not even the pouring rain. She darts out in the rain, to escape him, to her new found life as a social worker. The problem is posed, the resolution is left to conjecture, but the seeds of women's rebellion have been sown.

Bharathi (the name means 'daughter of India') is a decided improvement over the meek heroines encountered so far. She

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53. Narayan, 'Shelter' in *Lawley Road*, pp. 59-62.

represents the new breed of women who emerged during the days of the Independence struggle, women who had larger national goals, women who come under the spell of magnetic leaders like Gandhi and Nehru. Bharathi whom Srinivasa Iyengar labels 'The Malgudi Portia' is a versatile, vivacious girl, brimful of vitality which makes her lover Sriram pale beside her : "He was frightened of her. She seemed too magnificent to be his wife." (p. 167). This magnificent heroine is at the same time filled with feminine poetry.

Like Chandran, Sriram too is smitten at first sight. When Bharathi appears on Market Road in Malgudi, soliciting contributions for the national cause, "slender and young, with eyes that sparkled with happiness," he is too love struck to speak out. "He wanted to ask, 'How old are you ? What caste are you ? Where is your horoscope ? Are you free to marry me ?'" (p. 13). The fixation with caste and horoscope even in the throes of love has to be noted.

He realises soon she is not the usual girl one encounters in Malgudi. She has goals higher than he can ever dream of. While she is touched by his romantic nature, (as seen in the episode of his hugging her handspun saree to his breast when she is not in sight, and is caught by her in the act), she does not swerve from her path of duty in the footsteps of the Mahatma. She wages a ceaseless battle to uplift his mind, inspires him, teaches him to spin, to be self-sufficient and self-reliant and to adapt to Gandhian way of living. (p. 65). She has the wisdom to realise that the stud would soon be a bore. She tries to raise him from being a callow weak minded romantic youth into a higher human being. Shirley Chew praises Sriram for his steady devotion to Bharathi ; Bharathi is all the more praiseworthy in sticking to her high goals and insisting on Sriram's accompanying her at that noble level.<sup>54</sup>

She waits for the Mahatma's permission and blessing for their marriage and bade him wait too. After his term in jail

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54. Shirley Chew, 'A Proper Detachment : The Novels of R.K. Narayan', *Southern Review*, p. 155.

as a political prisoner, he comes out as devoted to her as ever. He muses : "If I tie a *Thali* (the wedding string or chain) around her neck, somehow, when she is asleep, things will be all right." (p. 163). Later he tells her : "I feel happy when you are with me and miserable when you go away." (p. 164). She is startled at his childlike dependence on her. He himself admits to the Mahatma that he lost his moorings in her absence : "Bharathi went away to jail, and there was no one who could tell me what to do, no one could show me the right way." (p. 171). She is in full control of herself, unlike him. She has enough wits to last for both of them. We have come a long way from the fire and fustian of Ramani to this weak male who needs his beloved to shore him up constantly. The novel ends with the Mahatma's premonition—that he may not be around to bless the couple in marriage the next day—coming true.

The woman who did not wish to be a full time home maker got scant cultural support. Here Bharathi is an unusual girl in unusual times. She is a trend setter who widens the female's perspectives in the nation's cause. The general fervour of the times also aids her in achieving her goals.

It is difficult, however, to sustain the fevered pitch of nationalism in the post independence era and hence we have to look for a sustaining role model elsewhere. Bharathi is important as a transition point between the passive and the active feminine consciousness in Indian fiction. The female in Narayan's fiction ceases to be an easy tumble or a trembling toadie. The male starts accepting the redemptive influence of the female. She has come of age, having found a new niveau within the usual framework. There is a compulsion to succeed in what she is setting out to do and she derives a satisfaction from this compulsion toward success. The meek female has given place to a vibrant female like Bharathi who is succeeded by Rosie and Daisy. They are active females, resilient figures for whom life seems open and fluid with possibilities.

## The Reduction of the Male

It is a curious factor in Indian literature, easily noted in a writer like Narayan, that the emergence of the active feminine is accompanied by the reduction of the male. The hero is no longer there. What we have is the antihero who exhibits the Sartrean nausea. He is unheroic, weakminded often unlovable and invariably pales 'beside his female' counterpart. It is the male who now arrives at apathy. Like Srinivas in his cyclical vision at the window, he feels nothing has any value. Hence he ceases to strive, to seek, to live. He exists for existence asserts itself until death and even life and death are not final in an endless cycle of births and deaths. The antihero is seen in the later group of novels, wherever the female is assertive. Sriram, Raju and Raman are puny creatures as compared to earlier male protagonists like Krishnan, Margayya or Jagan. The woman, on the other hand turns out to be a larger than life figure, often assuming mythic proportions in the eyes of her male counterpart. Thus Rosie looms large as Indra's danseuse in Raju's eyes while Daisy appears now as Mohini, the divine temptress and now as Surpanakha, the demoness out to devour him. A background of Hindu metaphysics and mythical tradition deepens the romantic commonplaces of illusion and sublimity.

The woman, even when she is a problematic figure of conflicting beliefs, exploding assumptions upon which the Indian society is contingent, towers over the man in the newer novels. The realm of intellect and career is no longer an exclusive masculine preserve. The active woman turns her attention from passivity, from reproduction to action and achievement. It is in the slow transformation of Margayya's wife, the Dulcinea of the kitchen into Daisy, the energetic population control officer that Narayan portrays the corresponding reduction in the status of the male protagonist. Krishnan, the enlightened teacher and Margayya, the assertive financial expert are replaced by the querulous Sriram and the Chameleon Raju. Raman, *the Painter of Signs* amuses us but he is definitely not of heroic proportions. The quest of the female

may often be disillusioning as in the case of Rosie and Daisy ; it may lead to a violation of their natures, it may not lead to lasting peace or happiness—but it leads most often to inward enlightenment. The reduction of the male protagonist and the emergence of the active female reflect the changing social, political and economic roles of man and woman in Indian society.<sup>55</sup>

### The Felt Continuities

In chronicling the married life of Jagan and Ambika in *The Vendor of Sweets*, Narayan reaffirms the felt continuities between the past and present, between the modern couples and their ancestors. The story is also a study in contrasts—between father and son, between the Hindu daughter-in-law and the Western common law partner, between the old and the young, between Gandhism and materialism.

Jagan, the sweet vendor of the title, disciple of Gandhi is bewildered by the lack of warmth, of understanding between him and his only son Mali. Mali breaks all the rules of his society, all the rules of common courtesy. He is mercenary, disrespectful, steals money from his own father, eats beef, drinks, squanders money on useless projects like that of the short story writing competition and the novel processing machine, lives in sin with the half caste Korean American girl, Grace and transgresses repeatedly.

The satire at times is too gross, Mali being too much of a caricaturist's portrait. Jagan, however, is realistically portrayed. His plight in this land of the Yahoos is all too real. He feels his son and Grace, his son's mistress, have defiled his ancestral home. That they could throw overboard tradition, that he had to adjust to social boycott on account of 'a beef-eating

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55. See Kathleen Newland, *The Sisterhood of Man* (New York : Norton, 1979). She traces the changing status of woman, all over the world especially in relation to changes in law, education, health, politics, work, media and family role and concludes that sexual equality has but made uneven progress.

Christian daughter-in-law', that they could live in sin "talking casually about it all,"—all these makes him suddenly realise how narrow his own existence has been, between his ancient home and the frying shop, between making money and spending it on a spoilt son. "Nothing, no bonds, or links or responsibility. Come together, live together and kick away at each other when it suited them" (p. 182). This is Mali's life with Grace.

Jagan has borne much from them. What breed of creatures are these? he wondered. They had tainted his ancient home." (p. 141). He barricades himself: "He did everything possible to insulate himself from the evil radiations of an unmarried couple living together." (p. 146). When he insists on their getting married, Grace says simply "Mo has no more use for me." (p. 140). One who looks upon tradition as inviolable, one who looked after an invalid wife all of her life, one who respected the sanctity of usage (p. 25), is fated to meet the very situation that is galling to his innermost core.

When he meets Grace at the railway station, he is thrown into a turmoil: "complete confusion. Married? When were you married? You didn't tell me. Don't you have to tell your father? Who is she? Anyway she looks like a Chinese. Don't you know one cannot marry a Chinese nowadays? They have invaded our borders. Or perhaps she is a Japanese?" (p. 64). Jagan begins to avoid people for "everything about him had become an inconvenient question" and Grace embarrassed him. He dreads questioning about "the casteless girl at home" and he starts reading more of the Gita to calm himself. (pp. 66, 72).

His Gandhism enables him to adjust, to do away with caste and family requirements. He waives away most of the objections generously for Grace's sake. His sister writes to him in anger and shame (p. 147), his brother does not invite him for the anniversary ceremonies for their late father, (p. 148) and Jagan is an outcaste, "absolved from obligations as a member of the family." Yet when the final blow is given by Mali he is totally unprepared.

He says to Grace, if you read our puranas, you will find that the wife's place is beside her husband whatever may happen." Grace tells him that they are not married, (p. 141) that Mali has been asking her to go back to the States. His reverence for the traditional concepts of wifhood are brushed aside by Mali: "That was in your day." (pp. 132-133). Fate seemed to decree that there should be no communication between them. So much for a modern materialistic union.

With Mali's liaison, Narayan brings an awareness of the contradictory aspect of things. Individualism, material benefits, educational opportunities and new ways of living do not ensure marital happiness for Grace and Mali. They have their peculiar problems and they go their separate ways. As opposed to this, what is emphasised in a traditionally arranged marriage is the feeling of oneness, of the union of *Purusha* and *Prakriti* not only here but in the lives to come. Narayan's belief in the transcendental power of love consistent with his traditional beliefs is seen in such marriages as those of Suscela and Ambika.

The only shelter that Jagan finds, is in the past, his past with Ambika who is now no more. He relives the days of his youth: the bridal inspection scene wherein his bride to be is tested and looked over like the princess in *The Princess and the Pea*, the haggling over the dowry, the matching of horoscopes, the arrangements for the wedding, the stiff injunctions of the elders to him to maintain dignity and decorum, the traditional wedding rites and feasting, his married life with a wife who observes the code of conduct befitting a daughter-in-law in a joint family, their long wait of ten years for an offspring, the prayers and taunts of the elders especially the mother-in-law ("one more stick to beat Ambika with"—p. 170), their vow to the God on the hill, the fetishes about a male child, Mali's Birth and Ambika rejoicing in her status of mother, her individuality in the midst of conformity, her own sense of values, her subtle control over husband and son, her death due to brain tumour—all these are recalled by Jagan prior to his renunciation and retreat into the woods. Together these vignettes present the

old world picture of marriage and domestic felicity under the traditional set up.

This is contrasted with Mali's live-in relationships which suffers in comparison. One feels sorry for the youngsters who miss out on all the endearing qualities of a marital relationship that their elders enjoyed as a matter of routine. Mali is the real outcaste as he belongs nowhere, neither in the East nor in the West. His relationship with Grace has resulted in a break with tradition. It leaves him with no psychic comforts, no spiritual support. He is casteless, outside his community, denied a place in the Malgudian world ; he is ill equipped to cope with this facelessness.

### **Whither Grace ?**

Grace provides a foil to Ambika, the traditional Indian wife. Intimate relationships, human understanding and shared interests together with the leisure and privacy to pursue them, present in Grace's life are absent to an appalling degree in Ambika's life. Yet the latter's marriage is more durable. Long after her death, despite their mutual differences, Jagan lives, relieving his wife with her, devoted to her in his own fashion in life and death. Grace on the other hand has an unstable relationship with Mali. Towards the end we find Mali in prison and she is on her way back to her country. Ambika had her share of problems in life. She was taunted by her mother-in-law for not bringing a gold waist belt as part of her dowry. She was then humiliated for ten years for being barren. She had to cope with her duties as a daughter-in-law in a large joint household. She had to dampen her husband's ardour—"Please don't create all this embarrassment for me. At least pretend that you are interested in the others." (p. 170). Jagan couldn't care as "he lived in a perfect intoxication of husbandhood." She behaved with proper decorum and taught it to her husband, too.

When she begs Mali, the charges of infertility are dropped and she attains a new status, having fulfilled an important



religious and social duty imposed on her. Her liberation, ironically, stems from her motherhood. The quality of relationship changes from one stage of life to another.

Despite her apparent conformity, she is by no means a slave like Savithri. She sticks to her status as human person, as a symbol of reality over which Jagan struggles. We are told she has a mind of her own which refuses to tolerate criticism beyond reasonable levels. She chooses to live and let live. She does not participate in Jagan's fads of leather making, native medicine and hygiene. In the clash over aspirin and margosa she chooses the former though she knows Jagan approves of the latter. She has a control over Mali, which is lost after her death. She illustrates the new creed : that a woman need not any longer be what is defined as a woman by men and yet she may conform to the traditional precepts. Her spark of individuality does not reduce her credibility as a fully rounded believable Indian woman.

The active feminine is set apart as a superior being when the male's glaring provincialism and intellectual ineptness are made obvious. In the last two novels, *The Guide* and *The Painter of Signs*, she is developed further along the line until she ends up logically as a different kind of being altogether, a sort of Madam Merteuil who reverses the tables, who looks at life from the other side of the biological telescope.

### **Rosie Shows the Way**

Narayan sees the perplexing, disturbing effects of the modern assertive feminine in Rosie. His tone, however, is not disturbing. He is affectionate and amused as ever and he presents the nightmare quality of the comedy of life beneath the surface.

In *The Guide* he sees the female protagonist as not in relation to a male but in relation to reality. Rosie is seen not primarily as the wife of Marco or the love of Raju but as an individual with desires and aspirations of her own which clash with the reality around her. She is definitely not one of the passive women whose lives as J. C. Oates states, are food as opposed to

men whose lives are money. She is much more of an egoist than the women we have come across so far. It is Narayan's way of obliquely hinting that the ideal independent woman may have as much egotism and as much aggression as the tyrannical patriarchy they criticise.

The process of growth in feminine consciousness seen in Bharathi and Ambika is continued in Rosie. She ceases to be quivering jelly of emotions that society had got accustomed to. When she introduces an element of volition, of choice in her life, thought, sex and imagination, she had to confront the male-oriented cultural milieu which looks askance at woman's independence. She typifies the movement of the Indian woman from her habitual world of deep rooted and mystic beliefs into a sophisticated and cynical one. Hers is the dilemma of the Indian, male or female, who has to make adjustments in the post-Gandhian world.

The new heroine like Rosie or Daisy illustrates another dilemma. When the modern women achieve a position of dominance and take on norms or traits of aggression and independence, their unconscious exertions drive them on to suffer as men would suffer. Being but human, masculine female or feminine male, they suffer the weakness of the flesh, the inequity of the law. They are drawn by their desires, human and biological, and restrained by some rule of conduct.

It is to be regretted that the woman no longer forms part of a mutual imagination in wedded life. There is no music, no harmony in marriage. It is an invalid life where love is invalidated. Every relationship is, in Sartrean parlance, a contest for possession. One either possesses or gets possessed. What we have here is exclusivity, the feminine exclusivity. The female is the possessor, the aggressor, the male is possessed bewitched and fooled.

The Sanskrit love ethic or misethic that woman discovers her derivation, her substance in man is toppled thoroughly with a subsequent tumble in the concept of the hero. Even when

she is treated by a male philosopher, the woman shares her male counterpart like a dog spurns tenderness and kindness, the female victim expiates the merits of male dominance, the weakness of minorities, and the pedestal of white malehood.

### The Daring Girl

Like *Rings of Saturn*, we get a brief glimpse in *The Daring Girl* of 1874. Rosie belongs to the class of domestic or domesticated, who, in the course of time, degenerated into public women. The shame and indignities suffered by such girls are also the lot of Rosie. To her the system is bent, the vicious circle of abuse and black and white associated stigma. Rosie goes herself about as far as the system's degree in domesticity. As Shamus Dal had dominated a female nation in *The Lord Dunsin*, education about was also used. Rosie said, however: "We are not considered respectable: we are not considered obliged." (p. 84).

She who had studied her manual labor for standing, for the sake of refinement from the mire of base gradations, finds herself trapped as before. Faced with the choice of being a domestic wife or a domestic, she chooses the latter. She answers Minto's advertisement in the matrimonial column, goes herself and her university education mentioned by him and goes married: "All the women in my family were impressed with the fact that a man like him was nothing or nothing out of her class, and it was decided that it was necessary to give up our education and it was worth the sacrifice." (p. 85).

Minto seems to have everything a girl could dream of: "He had a big house, a motor-car, he was a man of high social standing: he had a house outside London, he was living in it all alone, no family at all: he lived with his books and papers." Life seems to be made of heaven for her, especially as high prices are paid for no mother-in-law to molest and spoil the bride. Yet here is what Rosie says: "I'd have preferred any kind of mother-in-law, if it had meant one and the husband." (p. 85). Minto proves that he is a living experiment of man.

Despite her unusual name, she tries to be the ordinary housewife with a love of dancing thrown in. Raju says : "She chose to call herself Rosie. Don't imagine on hearing her name that she wore a short skirt or cropped her hair. She looked just the orthodox dancer that she was. She wore saris of bright hues and gold lace, had curly hair which she braided and beflowered, wore diamond ear rings and a heavy gold necklace. I told her at the first opportunity what a great dancer she was and how she fostered our cultural traditions and it pleased her." (p. 9)

Her tragedy is Marco's lack of appreciation of her art. She studies the king cobra for her snake dance, she tries to practise dancing everyday when her husband is not around, she lives and breathes and talks non-stop about dancing. She has too much of dance in her blood to give it up for the sake of a dull, dry partner like Marco. Raju gets a niche in her heart precisely because of his appreciation of her art, an appreciation that she sorely needs as an egoboost. (pp. 211-212, 121-122). Raju manipulates her through her love for dancing : "I found out the clue to her affection and utilised it to the utmost. Her art and her husband could not find a place in her thoughts at the same time ; one drove the other out." (p. 122)

She falls into the trap set for her by Raju. Adultery is no longer a male privilege. To be fair, she succumbs only after she feels that Marco had crushed her to the core. She concludes that her marital obligations have ceased. This conclusion is arrived at after a lot of ambivalence on her part. But there is no ambivalence, no looking back in Marco's rejection of her and her art. He calls her art 'street aerobatics' and rejects her totally. "You are here because I'm not a ruffian. But you are not my wife. You are a woman who will go to bed with anyone that flatters your antics. That's all." (p. 152). He buys a single ticket back to Madras and throws her out unceremoniously. There is no pity, no remorse even as she tries waiting for his grace, following him like a dog.

### Typically Indian

Paul Verghese calls Rosie a typical Indian heroine.<sup>55</sup> She is Indian in the sense. Despite her dedication to her art, she is conditioned by *Dharma* or duty appropriate to ones role in life and *Karma*, the severe concept of determinism. Expected to conform to the conventional feminine model, she develops an ambivalent attitude towards self-assertion. She feels guilt and remorse about breaking up her marriage. She has womanly pity for Lakshmi too. She feels that he too has suffered in his own way (p. 201). She cuts out his photograph from the illustrated magazine and places it on her dressing table. She sits up at night, troubled at the turn of events, worried about her conduct towards him: "After all, after all, he is my husband... Any other husband would have thrashed me then and there." (p. 201).

But her first and last love is her dancing. She pushes her feelings and prejudices to the background and concentrates on her art. With the silver tongued Raju as her lover and manager, she is soon highly acclaimed as *Pudini* the classical dancer. Self expression through art brings in satisfaction and material prosperity. Yet her new found freedom proves to be illusory. The men in her life try to manage her, each in his own way and she is too modern, too educated and intelligent to be unaware of it. There is a decline in her relationship with Raju when he descends from the romantic to the materialistic level. The lover promoter turns into a con man who looks upon her as a gold mine, a valuable possession. She ceases being treated as a commodity and regrets she did not visualize the commercialisation of her art. It has degenerated into a circus life. She says "I visualized it as something different," (p. 221). But she cannot stop now. Like bulls yoked to an oil-mush, she has to go round and round, keep dancing without a beginning or an end (p. 222).

Raju's manipulation reaches its high point when he urges

55. Verghese *Portrait of the Artist Under the Indian Sky*, p. 140.

in order to obtain a box of her jewelry from the bank. The moment he is arrested, Rosie sees him in a new light and detaches herself completely. She has learnt her lesson from Marco. She who used to break down even on small issues is now calm and self sufficient : "She merely said, 'I felt all along you were not doing right things. This is *Karma*. What can we do ?'" (p. 216). The concept of *Karma* is there all along—despite modernity, education, wealth and changes in ways of living. Nalini the dancer is still basically Rosie of the *devadasi* class. There is no hint of any break with the Hindu metaphysical system, no hint of any psychic confusion. Narayan is firmly rooted in Malgudi, in traditional beliefs. There is no need for an act of interpretation, no elaborate mytho-poetic tracery and no symbolic didacticism. All this and more is conveyed when Rosie utters the simple sentence, "This is *Karma*."

### **She would Manage**

The emergence of the resilient Rosie means the disappearance of the good things associated with the old definition of the female : the tenderness, the caring, the emphasis on personal relationships and courtesy and decorum. Raju bringing about his fall through his own cupidity and weakmindedness, she loses all respect for him, for the male. He is now reduced to a sort of hunger-on in the house ; the control passes on to her. She now manages her manager. "When the first shock of the affair had subsided, she became hardened. She never spoke to me except as a tramp she had salvaged. It could not be helped. She had to scrape together all her resources to help me. She went through her act of help in a sort of cold, businesslike manner." (p. 218)

There is, as Raju finds out, enough strength in her. She would manage successfully. Her career, at its height is now a mirage, a 'circus-life' for her ; yet she sticks to it and Raju reads about her commercial successes as an artiste from the newspapers that he gets in his prison cell. She is not wholly callous towards Raju : "If I have to pawn my last possession

"I'll do it to save you from jail. But once it is over, leave me once and for all ; that's all I ask. Forget me. Leave me to live or die, as I choose ; that's all." (p. 222).

She keeps her word. She picks up her dance engagements to collect enough money to argue his case. He is sentenced to a prison term of two years. She drops him out of her life completely and goes from strength to strength. By taking up a specific career decisively, she liberates herself from the twisted vision that cultural conditioning had imposed on her. Though it is hard to visualise the details of her future, one thing is certain : she does not need Marco or Raju any more, she would never be subordinate to another human being. Raju realises the truth : "Neither Marco nor I had any place in her life, which had its own sustaining vitality and which she herself had underestimated all along." (p. 223).

### **Kissing Sleeping Beauty Goodbye**

The reader has invariably come through identification not with the strong but with the bewildered pre-feminist like of Cinderella, Snow White and Sleeping Beauty. To this list could be added women like Savithri and Margayya's wife. But Daisy, Narayan's latest female protagonist kisses them goodbye. Daisy represents the warring forces within the psyche as well as the ineluctable relationship between the woman and the writer's psychic and literary identity.

Daisy is anything but a Sleeping Beauty. If Rosie dances away her disillusionment, Daisy in *The Painter of Signs* finds her vocation as a population control officer. The novel as a patent parody of current sexual myths, including the idea that the woman's chief function is to be a mother, cannot be missed. The Indian woman growing up through Savithri, Suseela, Bharathi, Ambika and Rosie, into Daisy, has now come of age. She is an image of social revolt and knows the world for what it is. She fights, manages, endures, but never whines or sulks in the dark room. She is a radically new role model and it is hard to contain all the elements aroused by her.

Thrown outside the stability of a joint family, Daisy faces a world of innumerable alternative patterns. In her quest for alternative possibilities, for wholeness, she demands autonomy. Like Rosie she takes up a specific career decision and sticks to her vocation at all costs. Both of them are subject to the double pulls of instinctual urges and career possibilities. But their physical passion soon falls into its place, giving them a free rein to achieve in their respective chosen fields of work. Narayan chronicles an escape from family life ; the only difference is that now it is the female who flees ; it is not a withdrawal or renunciation leading to the third stage or *asrama*. It is rather the Chekovian way of vanishing into life.

Daisy is an extraordinary being with a psychological and sexual sophistication that leaves her predecessors far behind ; we come to admire and fear her boundless energy. Through her, Narayan shows the power of the female intellect and vitality which shapes an altogether new balance between the sexes. The existing cultural absolutes are transformed, the roles are reversed and we get a Huxleyan picture of a new world where, without the aid of new biological weaponry like cybernetics and parthogenesis, the female attains a titanic womanhood, disregarding all known bounds.

The titaness desexes humanity. Ultimately the novel tends to be a sexual rather than a battle of sexes. Perhaps Narayan hints to us that liberation carried too far, either on the male or on the female side, tends to be negative and nihilistic. In Daisy and Raman, we have an endearing pair of lovers, battling and loving constantly and they seem to be made for each other. Yet at novel's end, they go their separate ways, he to his bachelorhood and the boarding house and she to her spinsterhood and family planning propaganda. Life amounts to a complicated system of checks and counterchecks resulting in the enthronement of the absurd.

Daisy is not a mere femme fatale. To be free completely, to equip herself to battle against male power hypocrisies, she tries to eliminate emotions altogether from her life. She does not



desire to have children. It is a bold decision to take, in the manner of Anna Karenina, but it is a great breach for an Indian woman, any woman for that matter. Her intellect makes sex amoral and she gets rid of what she calls the absurd male fetter, love. Rid of her Achilles heel, she feels really free to stand aside and let the man make a fool of himself. Love is revealed for what it is—the ultimate absurdity in life. She can state with justifiable pride: 'I am my own work.' It is the apogee of feminism.

To express their creative powers in a male ordained world, women like Rosie and Daisy tend to become masculine. They try to arrogate the masculine role to themselves. Rosie, after Raju's eclipse, is her own mistress; gone are her ambivalence and mental anguish over the breaking of traditional ties like marriage and family honour. Daisy spurns with equal case the Hindu proprieties around her. They do not succumb to the sexual power of the male over them; rather, they turn the tables on the weak, romantic heroes who are reduced to nullity. Raju and Raman have descended a long way down the evolutionary ladder; they are not like Krishnan or Margayya or even Jagan. They are weakminded enough to constantly bow down to the lady's wishes, grateful for her minor favours, even in moments of intimacy.

Rosie breaks the shackles of the *devadasi* caste. Daisy runs away from strict Brahminical orthodoxy. In the process of liberation they acquire masculine traits and manners. In the process we suspect whether they are denying a part of their female heritage though they escape being crushed by it. One wonders whether the role reversal is, after all, a parody. Rosie and Daisy, it is true, are no longer sleeping beauties. But it is a debatable point whether their new found Amazonic stance leads to equality in true sense. The novel leaves us with an open end—we wonder whether the much vaunted liberation of woman leads to a larger frustration with life rather than the simply sexual.

## The Comedy about Birth Control

Though India is being crowded out of its being by its teeming millions, there is still space enough for one more love affair in Malgudi, between Daisy and Raman, the exponents of the modern arts of contraception and publicity. Raman, the painter of the signboards, is unmarried over thirty, young hearted and takes his bachelor status seriously. Underneath a veneer of the polite, smart-talking small-town businessman, he conducts a non-stop quizzical dialogue with himself about his fellow human beings and the meaning of their lives.

He aims at establishing the Age of Reason and does his own bit of population control, sticking to his bachelordom in the face of many attractive proposals from traditional families, much to the chagrin of his old aunt. He wishes to establish that the man-woman relationship is not inevitable and that there are other things more important in life than sex. Yet he has his problems: "Money and sex, he reflected, obsessive thoughts, too much everywhere—literature, magazines, drama or cinema deal with nothing but sex all the time but the female figure, water-soaked, is enchanting."

Daisy, with an unlikely and mysterious name like Rosie, descends on Malgudi: "Daisy! What a name for someone who looked so very Indian traditional and gentle. One would expect a person on this job to be somewhat matronly, like the mother superior in the convent, large broad faced, towering over others, an executive type who could with a flourish of her arms order people about. But this girl looked like a minor dancer."

Appearance is deceptive; Daisy pursues her vocation of family planning with missionary zeal so that soon Rama concludes that she is undaisy like, 'more like emery paper.' He feels bewildered by her intensity: "wanted to ask, why such anger? Why not accomplish it all with less grimness?" She could smile only when she forgets her mission of population control and such moments are rare indeed. She is a runaway from a strict Brahmin family, brought up and educated by

outdoors dictator', 'Mohini', 'the stern mentor' by Raman, needs time and space to let love grow in her heart. Having eschewed all emotions, having covered her biological faultlines carefully, she is still wrapped up with glory of birth control statistics, totally unaware of the havoc that she has wrought upon the poor painter of signs. The comedy about birth control involves the tragedy of two unfulfilled individuals whose love is not excavated in happy wedded union.

### The Possible She

Daisy is an unusual girl who grew up in the usual way in a Hindu joint family. She tells Raman in a rare relieving of the past (unusual for she is one who never dwells on the past) that she did not choose the ordinary satisfactions of life, that she resented the immense psychological demands made on her as daughter in the huge joint household that she was born into. This was a forerunner of the burdens to come as wife and mother and seeing no way out, she runs away. At thirteen, she tells us, she was wiser, maturer than her own poor mother who was the usual humble cog in the wheels of family life.

We have the remarkable picture of a bridal inspection scene, this time through girl's eyes. So far we have seen it through the male protagonist's perspective, as for example in the case of Chandran and Jagan. Here we find how easily a girl's sensibility and tender feelings could be sacrificed for the sake of the family honour, prestige and traditional decorum. The thirteen year old girl who hated so much common living, who yearned for privacy and individuality amidst a mass existence, is called aside one day and asked to prepare herself for inspection by a prospective groom and his parents. She, however, is not the fragile princess of the *The Princess and the Pea*. She states that she would rather do the inspection, that 'if it is not done, it is better that someone starts doing it now', that she would like to work rather than be a wife. (p. 130).

The parents are outraged but a kindly uncle persuades her to go through the ceremony of being viewed and assessed. The picture is brought to us vividly in Daisy's own words : "They

decked me in all the jewelry pieces borrowed from my sister-in-law in the house, diamond and gold all over my ears, neck, nose and wrist and clad me in a heavy sari crackling with gold lace. I felt suffocated with all that stuff over me. I felt sick and felt that I was loosing my identity. I hated the whole scene. I was seized with a feeling that I was in a wrong world, and that I was a stranger in their midst. I saw my mother's face beaming with satisfaction and I was irritated at her simplicity. Although I was only thirteen, I had my own notions of what was good for me and what I should do in life." (p. 131).

Daisy does not succumb to the parental pat on the back or the nod of approval from her larger family. She is of sterner stuff than all the heroines we have come across so far. She knows that it is hard to get a suitable bridegroom, that societal pressure is the reason why most parents push their girls into marriage, that, unmarried, a Hindu girl fails to fulfil her social and religious duties and cannot hope to find a place in Heaven. Yet courageous as ever, taking her life in her own hands, she confronts reality and makes a mockery of the whole bridal inspection ceremony. She strides up to the visitors who are made much of by others in the family. She is not the coy young girl but the strident soldier marching with "jewellery jingling and the horrible lace sari rustling." Daisy continues to inspect rather than be inspected: "They all looked a little shaken at the very style of my walk. His father seemed so taken aback he ceased to speak of his son's achievements, my mother said, 'Make your obeisance, prostrate yourself on the ground.' I shook my head. I have always hated the notion of one human being prostrating at the feet of another." (p. 132)

She believes in the independence of the spirit. To her love is a voluntary action, not an act of necessity. Naturally she could not brook the passivity of an orthodox, arranged marriage. She is educated and enlightened, young as she is, head and shoulders above this bridegroom whose only qualification is his wealth and his ancestral lands. She trounces him easily. The ceremony ends on a note of anti-climax: "It could not go on like this. Plainly the whole proposal had collaps

Before I could do further damage, they hurled me back to an inner room and a hundred eyes scowled at me. I thought they'd all strangle me. But they left me alone. For days no one spoke to me. I had brought disgrace on the family by my unseemly behaviour.... It was going to be difficult to find a bridegroom for me any more or for the other girls in the family as well. I had damaged the family reputation." (p. 133).

She could not wither under family ostracisation for long. She is a positive being with a huge potential for activity. She runs away from this restrictive atmosphere to be educated and brought up by the missionaries. Her religion becomes the religion of service to the people. Her material requirements are shrunk to the size of a small bag and we see her as the zealous population control officer going from village to village, preaching the message of less is more, much like a female Gandhi.

Here is one instance where the possibilities in the active feminine are used for the good of the society. She does not brood over the fact of being on the wrong side of the sexual tracks. She travels around and lives as simply and effortlessly as an average villager eating what she gets, sleeping where she finds shelter. It is the male, here Raman, who finds it difficult to adjust to his environment. He cannot keep pace with her mentally and physically. Her revolt against convention is feasible precisely because she is twice as good as the male around her.

The possibilities in her enable her to pave her own way of revolt. She is no longer the gothic persecuted maiden who believes in motherhood as an act of God. She does not hesitate to use self-protective dissimulation and cunning to get along in a male dominated world. Witness her climbing on to a tamarind tree quietly at night to escape Raman's attentions. (pp. 95-96). The author makes her challenge male society on its own terms, by humorous exposure, ridicule and correction. Even when she succumbs to her instinctual urges, she does so

with a majesty and a natural sense of ease that is totally lacking in her lover. He is agitated, keyed up and anxious about the eventual turn the relationship might take. She lives for the moment and takes him, shriven and submissive ; on her terms, when it suits her, with a queenly grace. The feminine principle has travelled a long way in Indian fiction, leaving the likes of Savithri far behind. Daisy's progress is all the more remarkable in that she has virtually no help from the members of her own sex who have settled down for life being nothing more than *Maya* or illusion or absurdity.

### **The Devil and the Tamarind Tree**

Daisy quotes the proverb 'when you are married to the devil, you must be prepared to climb the tamarind tree' apropos Raman's behaviour the night the two were stranded in the wilderness. One of the delights of this novel is the affectionate and humorous way the erotic relationship is treated without missing any of the inventive and attentive details that make a liaison between two such zealous propagandists so attractive. The thematic debate between vitality and control, between social and personal necessities is laid aside for the time being. Whoever is the devil, Raman admits that he has been completely immersed in Diasy-ism (p. 137). He had tried to be a brahmacharya, a celibate and she had tried to eschew sex and do something meaningful with her life. In India, surely, a world that is so tightly packed, there is little business that is to purely one's own. The problem for the novelist is to devise a setting in which the pair have the leisure to be together, to 'waste' time together, though no time they are together could be called wasted. Spending time together, Narayan seems to indicate impishly, is not all there is of human life but it is no less important than the question whether we are to lead this life alone. Busy as these two ideologues are; a natural setting for their affair is accordingly one of luxury.

With wavering tenderness they almost come together when they are stranded in between two villages and the cartman mistaking them for newly weds, leaves them together for the

[his life so completely that he turns himself upside down to get her favours, agrees to the strange and impossible conditions she lays down for a 'marriage'; and generally makes a fool of himself. Daisy's attitude toward marriage is casual: "Nothing extraordinary for a man and a woman beginning to live under the same roof." (p. 168). She is not a gooey pastiche of sweetness and sex and subservience. She is someone toiling to find her own corner in life, to be accepted on her own terms. She loses her temper occasionally but goes about with remarkable good humour and non-chalance, dismantling old conventions and building her own tenets to lead her own life as she chooses to.

Her relationship with Raman threatens to turn into an Onassis-Kennedy type of marriage bristling with legal clauses and conditions never heard of in small town Malgudi. Perhaps it is the author's way of obliquely pointing out how much savagery and/or soulless routine is involved in the tight familiarity of married life. Constant bumping into one another and friction over things, major and minor, often transform love and romance which, however, thrilling are fragile and evanescent, in the best of times, into legal contractual wrangles and sloppy living. Daisy concludes with Raman that the *Gandharva* type of marriage is most suitable for them: "That was the type of marriage one read about in classical literature. When two souls met in harmony the marriage was consummated perfectly, and no further rite or ceremony was called for." (p. 158).

Daisy, who rejected ancient customs, accepted this as a sensible thing, though she, typically of one who is involved in larger issues than the personal, leaves out the practicalities of such a marriage and its consequences. It is left to Raman to worry about mundane matters. He accepts her decision to stick to her own name. She, his 'final deciding authority', adds a couple of conditions to the 'marriage': "One, that they should have no children and too, if by mischance, one was born, she would give the child away and keep herself free to pursue her social work. Raman was not to object or modify this in any manner." (p. 158)

Raman, like the ancient King Santhanu in the *Mahabharata* who bartered a kingdom and all his issue for the favours of his beloved Ganga, is equally intoxicated by the personality of Daisy and agrees to all the conditions she imposes. She explains herself: "Long ago I broke away from the routine of a woman's life. There are millions of women who go through it happily. I am not one of them. I have planned for myself a different kind of life. I have a well defined purpose from which I will not swerve. I gave my word to the Reverend that I would not change my ideas. If you want to marry me, you must leave me to my own plans even when I am a wife. On any day you question why or how, I will leave you. It will be an unhappy thing for me, but I will leave you." (p. 159).

Raman is indeed in a muddle. He realises this soon enough: "If she displayed the normal fecundity of our country-women, she would be handing out babies at a fast rate to a hooded nun or a bearded bishop in some charity home! And no question asked, at the slightest hint of a query, she would melt out of sight and be gone forever. She was indeed a great puzzle at every turn. He was perhaps making a fool of himself by this marriage. But it was a *Gandharva*-style marriage, as easily snapped as made. In any event they'd have to go up before a registrar, if not for anything but to protect the child's nomenclature. The child was not to come, and so why worry, what a muddle; Whatever it was, their signature before a registrar would be inevitable." (p. 169).

In the end, even this signature before the registrar is not forthcoming. He, for her sake, tears up his roots, defies his old aunt who has spent a lifetime caring for him ever since he lost his parents in an accident, stores the household goods and the ancestral rice-cooking pot away and equips himself with glass and aluminium in the kitchen—he knows he would have to be the cook-cum-manager in this unusual household. What a turnabout for a carefree bachelor under the wings of a protective loving aunt who had totally dedicated herself to 'gathering fodder' for him for thirty years.



Raman's troubles do not cease with his acquiescence to Daisy. His aunt refuses to live with them in the ancestral home. Hers is the classic objection : What is her caste ? What is her history ? She ran away from home. Don't you know all that ?.... A girl who finds her parents intolerable ! Those who are orphaned pray for parents while this girl..." (p. 154). Leaving him desolate, she sets on a journey to Benares, there to spend the remaining days of her life, vowing not to come back to a home defiled by him and Daisy. This is similar to Jagan's flight from his house—only here, Raman genuinely feels lost without his aunt. Passivity has also its limits. His aunt's friend admonishes him : "You think you can do what you like and command her to stay and look on. No, my boy, you are mistaken if you think that we will be slaves of the family all our life time. No, no, there is a limit to forbearance." (p. 162).

### **The Bride does not Come Home**

Raman keeps wondering about his future with Daisy : "What sort of a married life is this going to turn out to be ? Separate lives and separate everything. Only the roof was to be common, and perhaps the bed—even of that he was not certain how long." (p. 172). Daisy, however, maintains an indifferent air to all his plans for the future as if to say : "Do what you like, I don't care and I do not need your attention or arrangement." (p. 172).

At the last moment, the bride does not come home. Daisy has a vision beyond biology. Having eschewed the ordinary satisfactions of life she comes to see marriage, even this free and generous arrangement with Raman, as a trap to ensnare her soaring spirit. She counters Raman's last-minute abject pleading. "Married life is not for me. I have thought it over. It frightens me. I am not cut out for the life you imagine. I can't live except alone. It won't work." (p. 179). She who has patterned her whole life so far as an escape from culturally imposed and narrow-minded, placid domesticity, has the strength of will to transcend her biological urges and stick to

her vocation. She has her moment of regret ; she says penitently enough to Raman who made her repressed instincts bloom : "Forgive me for misleading you." Then she advises him : "Calm yourself. You will be happy, married to someone very different. Seek a proper partner for yourself ... You are everything a girl dreams of." The author adds : "For the first time she was sounding so emotional and personal. He noticed at least fancied, that her eyes were misted and her thin lip twitched." (p. 180). Ultimately each human being is thrown to his/her own inner resources and like Krishnan, the English teacher, we feel, loneliness is the essential concomitant of modern life.

The truth, one suspects, is in the fact that she has outgrown Raman, the naive romantic weakminded, though affable, lover. She knows that she is twice as good as any male around her and wants to achieve on her own terms. Her sense of purposefulness in life, of achievement, kills, in Raman's word, the great gift of love within her, the tremendous storehouse of love that can give new life to him. (p. 180). Her relationship with Raman is viewed by her as a moment of weakening and she asks him to forget her. (p. 179). We come back to what Narayan started out with : that there is no such thing as a life-force relationship, that all love, all attachment is illusory, that any change, as Meenakshi Mukherjee puts it, is to be viewed negatively, "as a play of shadows, as illusion, an unreality, like a bubble, which will burst sooner or later, and the normal order of the cosmos will prevail again."<sup>58</sup>

Daisy moves out of Raman's orbit ; while he stagnates, she moves on. Raman reflects sadly : "May be we will live together in our next *Janma*. At least then, she will leave people alone, I hope." The wheel has turned a full circle. What Tagore's Binodini felt is now being expressed by the male

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58. Mukherjee, *The Twice Born Fiction*, p. 150.

protagonist.<sup>59</sup> Daisy does not succumb to love, that curious combination of passion, romance, custom and convenience, something she holds as a trade-off that held down the passive feminine. She sets a new pattern for the Indian woman in that she makes a fullest use of her anatomy and yet does not forget her goals in life. The active woman rejects her male counterpart, whether it be Raju or Marco or Raman when he does not measure up to her. In this relentless drive towards the pursuit of her chosen vocation, she raises a number of questions in the reader's mind : How much success is possible for her, how much is enough, whether in her single minded pursuit she is not repeating the excesses of male chauvinism, where does this all lead to—happiness, liberation, *moksa* ?—These have yet to be answered.<sup>60</sup>

59. Refer pp. 37-8 of this study. What Tagore's Binodini lamented about two decades earlier is now being echoed by Narayan's Raman. The female protagonist's sense of woe and helplessness is now transferred to the male : We have come a long way since the days of Binodini.

60. See Viola Klein, *The Feminine Character : History of an Ideology* (New York : International Universities Press, 1949), pp. 99, 102. Her question "What are the limits to which society can go in granting women equality without endangering its continued existence and the happiness of individuals ? is still to be answered. See also Hunt Morton, *What is a Man ? What is a Woman ?* (New York : Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1979). He tries to arrive at a conclusion : he states the sexes are equal but in some ways will always be different. The new men and women of the next century, he states, would be largely androgenous but still clearly distinguishable as male or female not only in appearance but also in personality. See also "Male/Female : The Other Difference", *The Reader's Digest* (October 1981), p. 17. This article corroborates the same view but it is still inconclusive as it insists on a separate but equal position which is difficult and untenable over a period of time. It would be a mistake to lump equality with sameness. The other danger is that, in their quest for equality, women may deny the need for nurturance, and warm relationships and repeat the mistakes of male chauvinism all over again. Susan Lydon tries to correct the picture : "Sexual liberation for women is wrongly understood to mean that women will adopt all the forms of masculine sexuality. As in the whole issue of woman's liberation, that is really not the point." See Susan Lydon, 'Liberting Women's Orgasm' in *The New Eroticism*, ed. Philip Nobik (New York : Random House, 1970), pp. 225-226. See also Betty Friedan, *The Second Stage* (New York :

As Daisy goes to a remote village to check the sudden spurt in births, as Raman cycles back to 'The Boardless', the bastion of bachelor souls, as Rosie dances her way through a solitary existence, as Raju awaits his martyrdom as a saint, one wonders whether sexual liberation is an unmixed blessing : carried to an extreme like Margayya' mania for money, like everything else, it leads to unhappiness. Narayan has a final answer to all these queries. He indicates that all happiness is only of a negative not a positive nature, that there is no lasting happiness in life, that we get delivered from some pain or problem only to be worried by a new pain or problem, that life is all *maya* or illusion—yet life goes on and on.

### **From Saried Angel to Totalitarian Harpy ?**

An extraordinary variety of feminine temperaments have been countered so far in R.K. Narayan. Women have been identified in the main with the older image in literature as weak, malleable, economically backward and subordinate beings. But Narayan has shown us how Savithri has gradually given way to Rosie and Daisy, newer role models to ponder about. To break from cultural conditioning, to belong and to be accepted on one's own merit even in a traditional bound male oriented society is possible. The newer role model is necessary to show women in India that the female need not always be the victim of the species, that, even though she is in an in-group society, in an insensitive age, she can establish values of her own if she has sufficient energy and volition to do so. The process is by no means an easy one. Says Krishna Ahooja Patel : "Self-reliance is a long road as hazardous for

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60 (Contd.)

Summit Books, 1981). She says in her new book that the feminist frontier in the 80's is the family, an idea which is bound to irk much of the feminist movement. She thinks the feminine mystique has been replaced by a feminist mystique which is equally limiting as it freezes women in reaction against men and family life. Daisy, for example, is often as aggressive and opinionated as any male chauvinist. Narayan shows us that woman's sexuality is immensely varied and delicate and literature may be a better guide to it than is often thought to be.



heart, of misplaced trust, of the burden of one-sided love which are all caused by the failure of the people concerned to communicate ; they end up by destroying each other.

The idea of being a lady undergoes a transformation in Daisy. Savithri is burdened by culturally imposed feelings of guilt and shame and she does not rise above them. Bharathi operates under unusual circumstances and rises above local restrictions to the level of a national figure. Ambika sows the seeds of resistance quietly. In Rosie we witness the confrontation between the morality of the heart and the morality of social sin. Momentarily her sense of social conscience prevails—she struggles with her feeling of moral dishonesty, and her sense of compromise. But she surmounts them, puts up a brave front and faces the world on her own terms. Daisy is a phenomenon by herself. She provides a new pattern of behaviour. She points to such complex modalities of change in the Indian woman that we could keep cutting into her as “into the rich density of wedding cake.”<sup>63</sup>

The transformation of the passive feminine, the meek Dulcinea of the kitchen like Margayya's wife, into Daisy, the radical population control officer shows us how imaginative literature could trace the progress of the role of the woman from novel to novel. The lady who had appeared at first as an angel clad in a sari (Succela) is now presenting the picture of a totalitarian harpy in Daisy. Womanhood, in the process, has been deromanticised thoroughly. If we take Daisy revolt against

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62 (Contd.) .

from the time of the Shelleys and Mary Wollstonecraft, it was the publication of H.G. Wells's *Ann Veronica* (1909) that heralded female sexuality and ambitions as something healthy and normal and to be written about. But even Wells, Arnold Bennett and other writers sympathetic towards feminism, often presumed that woman live for romantic fulfilment alone. In the West too; liberation has been; at best partial and contradictory.

63. Henry James, *The Art and the Novel* (New York : Norton, 1969), pp. 87-88.

the exploitative system to its logical conclusion, it would entail the destruction of the family as a social unit.

When the active female choose to manipulate, to exercise love as a lever of power, to maintain mastery, she becomes an arch heretic. Here Narayan points out the danger of separating sex from love, love from sex and procreation from both. The consequence is the disintegration of society. If the mistakes of male dominance are taken over by rampant feminism, if the male chauvinist is replaced by the totalitarian harpy, the resulting androgyny would hardly contribute to the stability of the existing social institutions. There would be no question of any mythic union, no union at all. Couples could not live happily ever after, rather, could not live in the proper sense of the terms, happily or otherwise. Narayan seems to be anxious to avoid this androgynous blurring, this cultural death wish.

### **No More Stars in the Sky**

Through Daisy he does not wish to advocate feminine totalitarianism. It is not a clarion call for revenge, for all the ills dealt out to Indian womanhood right from the day the pregnant Sita was abandoned in the forest by her righteous and high-minded husband in *The Ramayana*. There are no more Sitas or Savithris but there are hardly any Daisies either. Daisy has supplanted her elder sisters as the newest most vibrant role model and Daisyism is bound to crop up here and there, in fiction as well as in life.

The new female protagonist does not merely seek a change in her status. It is not that Rosie wants to do away with Raju or Marco. Nor does Daisy set out to prove that all men are duds or bores. Each seeks a higher level of enlightenment, a higher consciousness, a closer and conscious sharing of values and constant co-operation. The women now form a select group of enlightened individuals and the men are way down, in no way compatible as partners in life. The broken rhythms of internal self searching and the dissociation of life from external events leave the women disillusioned.

The disillusioned heroine like Rosie or Daisy has little left. She turns harsh, cynical for she does not stumble upon an universal piece of gnomic wisdom or encouraging humanitarianism. She turns out to be a problematic figure of conflicting beliefs and exploding assumptions upon which her world is contingent. She knows and suffers a lot in her own way and her achievement is in no way on a level with her striving. Her progress is slow, and heartbreaking marked as it is by the shrinking of known boundaries, the exploding of mysteries, what Stan and Amy Parkers call, "the breaking of effigies and the expelling of used poetry from the system."<sup>61</sup> There is no more poetry in her life, no more stars in her sky. It is often a case of defeated aspirations and bruised men and women which make life complex and unlivable. Narayan's message is clear : If this is life, merely to accept it as it is a *great* comfort, compared to battling which is akin to beating one's head on the wall.

The quest of these women, though disillusioning, gives us, however, a glow of ethical insight, an inward enlightenment. What they fight for, is life, their right to their own lives, and the male can no longer be a substitute for life. Narayan does not romanticize life. Nor is there any prolonged treatment of the seamier side of life. Even adultery and illicit relationships constitute a respect for the deeper morality of human sympathies and loyalties between sensitive beings. Narayan with his sympathy for the human predicament cannot be a full blooded satirist. He pulls back from a full fledged attack on any issue and creates authentic Breughel like portraits of varying shades and intensity, a microcosm of the society he knows so well. Reading about these men and women, gives us a sense of vicarious participation, a feeling of shared exhilaration.

These active female protagonists often feel they are misfits. They battle against adversities with the sad but certain know-

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64. Stan and Amy Parker, *The Tree of Man* (New York : Viking, 1955), p. 448.



believe that there is nothing worth striving for, that they are trapped in a world of "old India" with its "the terrifying meaninglessness of life in Calcutta or Bombay or Madurai, that turning away may not be self-delusion and that ultimately even resignation and acceptance may be a narcissistic self-indulgence, might have the desire and the will. Yet as we read about D. or and K. see, they delight us even in defeat and we look forward with them towards a life beyond sex, beauty, or love and art and fulness. A little bit of Daisysun, however, does not let it pass seem, would do a lot of good and dashes up the proud Indian woman, already faded out as an old tree godless, the best of burden.

Arlene Babst sum up the potential of these radical women, leading by their "lovely lives": "There might also be for the women without men, the chance at last to pursue worlds other than those formulated by men, worlds of art, invention, spiritual quest, adventure, achievement, all of which demand the presence of women once reserved only for men. Pursuing such newer realms, a woman might discover a creature just as fascinating and challenging as men: woman herself."<sup>65</sup>

### Back Under the Banyan Tree

Madurai is immutable. The cosmology is cyclical with an ambience of reincarnation cloaked in insouciance. A steady and inventive deployment of a repertoire of traditional concepts gives rise to a sense of continuity and development in the novels of R.K. Narayan. He reinstates the traditional Indian pattern of faith in life. There is a good deal of lopsided family life where there is little or no understanding. The relationship between man and woman bristles with a lot of thorny issues. Yet life goes on and we come back to where we began—Life begins anew under the banyan tree for Margayya and all of us. We are re-integrated into the original state of stability and normalcy. Even radicals like Daisy are but ripples on the surface—the norm of the cosmos will prevail again.

65. Arlene Babst, "Women Without Men", *Bulletin* (23 September 1981), p. 6.

This ideology of acceptance which gained currency during the bland days of Nehru era does not find much favour now. Achievement, according to Narayan, begins with acceptance. Espousing the Hindu equilibrium, he illustrates his belief in Gandhian non-violence and non-interference. His novels also indicate the nightmare comedy of life—a discouraging finality of ends and means displayed with playfulness but also with a good deal of latent control. His themes are based on the archetypal motifs of withdrawal, renunciation and non-attachment. The women protagonists, even in the novels where feminine conscience is awakened, are active only within these given co-ordinates.

However, one is not to mistake his traditional beliefs as constituting a deadly total negation of life, an insensibility, a deliberate turning away from the realities.<sup>66</sup> His fictional heroines reflect the changes in society. All that he says is that change is not a necessity but a privilege in his society, that certain basic precepts of Hindu life which are essential for Indian spiritual continuity and consolidation are ever present beneath the surface comedy. The grimness of life being predetermined by forces like *Karma* is lightened by his affectionate and humorous touch.

The female protagonists, even as they rebel against unjust social pressures, sense the futility of all such rebellion. Yet they do rebel for, not to confront harsh reality, would be comparable to living death. They display courage as they try to overcome humiliation, resignation, silence, *Karma*, inaction and self-pity. They portray the classic Indian dilemma of adjustment to the environment. Now a symbol of retreat (Margayya's wife) now a symbol of growth (Ambika, Daisy and Rosie), they are vivid examples of contemporary Indian women. Given the irreversible facts of Indian life, of the human race, these women achieve little. But their significant contribution lies in the fact that they arouse the reader's consciousness.

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66. Naipaul, *India : A Wounded Civilization*, p. 21.



In a world beset by problems, Narayan advocates acceptance of traditional norms for the sake of spiritual tranquility. Perhaps Margayya's wife is, in the ultimate analysis, wiser than the younger bubbly and restless heroines like Daisy and Rosie. R.K. Narayan is a great collector of old concepts, a sammler of order, of tradition. The past, according to him is a valuable heritage and is not to be slighted. Malgudi is changeless beneath a veneer of change. It is run by a defining set of forces that dictates the quality and direction of his call. Is he defending his culture or sheltering behind it? He is doing both simultaneously.

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67 (Contd.)

perceived a balance of power in human relationships. He marvelled at the invisible forces of the universe which maintained this subtle balance in all matters. It was so perfect that it seemed to be unnecessary for anybody to do anything.... If only one could get a comprehensive view of all humanity, one would get a correct view of the world : things being neither particularly wrong nor right, but just balancing themselves." See R.K. Narayan, *Mr. Sampath*, pp. 200-201.

## CHAPTER 5

# Kamala Markandaya : Autonomy, Nurturance and The Sisterhood of Man

*I have always agreed with Freidan that many feminists were beating their heads against a wall by trying to deny the importance to most women of nurturing, childbearing, and warm familial relationships. Denying women's needs will get us nowhere—but deeper into the trouble we are now in.*

—Erica Jong,  
*Saturday Review*

*On the last day, just before Kit clasped the thali about her neck that would make her his wife, she turned away from him and covered her face with her hands and bent her head and lost herself—unmindful of the waiting priest, the watching people, in the depth of her prayer ; and emerged from it with her face pale and clear and serene ; and turned to Kit and bared her throat for the necklace he held and smiled at him as if he were the only one there.*

—Kamala Markandaya,  
*Some Inner Fury*<sup>1</sup>

*She gazed at him, compromised, uncompromising, the look he learned to know very well later, in England. "That is the physical fact of the matter", she said.*

—Kamala Markandaya,  
*The Nowhere Man*<sup>2</sup>

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1. Kamala Markandaya, *Some Inner Fury* (New York : Signet, 1950), p. 59. All subsequent quotations will be taken from this edition of the text.
  2. Markandaya, *The Nowhere Man* (Bombay : Orient Longman, 1975), p. 150. All further references will be from this edition of the novel.

*Women had no boltholes. There was no escape for them, they had to stand where they were and take it.*

—Kamala Markandaya,  
*Two Virgins*<sup>3</sup>

*Against his will it struggled up. That desire was embedded there too. In her. In women. In sexual flesh, whether man or woman. That woman had her physical needs no less exigent than his own. Ripe as he was ; and he managed to remember, a good bit younger. It was in a way a dismal awakening, because having conceded desire he had to crown it with the freedom for fulfilment. He found it detestable.*

—Kamala Markandaya,  
*The Golden Honeycomb*<sup>4</sup>

*When a society is young or in its prime, and when the man-woman relationship is living, the question of financial dependence or independence between man and wife does not arise at all. The woman is never a doll in the husband's doll house, nor is the husband the galley-slave in the wife's galley.*

—Nirad C. Chaudhuri,  
*To Live or Not to Live*<sup>5</sup>

The wife of Bath has spoken out supportively of women writers :

*Begod, if women had written stories  
As clerks han within hir oratories  
They wud han written of men more wikednesse  
Than at the mark of Adam may redresse.*

The fact that the admirable wife was created by a male author ironically refutes the argument that only a woman can give us an inside story based on full participation in a woman's consciousness. The emphasis has shifted both in the fictive systems and their creators from gender identity to individual to indi-

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3. Markandaya, *Two Virgins* (New Delhi : Vikas, 1977), p. 123. All further references will be from this edition of the novel.

4. Markandaya, *The Golden Honeycomb* (London : Chatto Windus, 1977), p. 329. All further references will be from this edition of the novel.

5. Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *To Live or Not To Live*. (New Delhi, 1970), p. 150.

dual relationships.<sup>6</sup> The ideal novelist may well be a kind of spiritual hermaphrodite combining a man's scope and a woman's sensitivity. We have to refuse to be prejudiced by sexual provinciality whatever its province happens to be.<sup>7</sup> Kamala Markandaya combines the two and adds a distinctive sociological bent to her fiction.

She, however, is not a theorist to dwell upon caste and class problems only. Her concerns being predominantly socio-economic, her novels offer us a savage tally of brutality, ignorance, mental and physical bludgeoning that the ordinary Indian, man or woman, is subject to. Dire conditions of existence propagate a constant battering of the emotions leading to deathlike apathy or else, unbridled violence. More often than not, as she illustrates, it is the woman who bears the brunt of such bludgeoning attacks and sinks into an apathetic hinterland of bleakness.

### Peasant to Princess

Kamala Markandaya has a varied repertoire of women characters in her fiction. Her first novel, *Nectar in a Sieve* published in 1954 deals with the life and travails of a peasant woman Rukmani. Faced with great odds like famine, death, infidelity and prostitution amidst a backdrop of bonechilling poverty, she wages a constant battle. She wins our sympathy by dint of her sheer will power that endures a life without hope like nectar in a sieve. The plight of the rural woman in poverty is juxtaposed with that of the urban poor woman in *A Handful of Rice*. Here we see Nalini, a sprightly carefree girl, transformed slowly into a harassed and victimised woman,

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6. The dispute may go on and on. The acceptance of S.T. Coleridge's declaration that all great minds are androgenous may resolve the dilemma.

7. See Markandaya, "On Images", paper presented at the Seminar on Socio-Literature at the East-West Centre for Cultural Interchange, Honolulu (August 1973). Also refer to Dorothy Blair Shimer, "Sociological Imagery in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya" in *World Literature Written in English*, ed. K.S.N. Rao (November 1975), p. 357.

trying her best to pull her husband and children through the miseries of a cold hostile life in the big city. Nalini is as doomed as Rukmani.

*Some Inner Fury, Possession* and *The Nowhere Man* deal with East-West relationships in a man-woman context while *Two Virgins* gives us an in-depth study of the problem of growing up into an average woman of an average family in contemporary India. Sarojini and Dandekar in *A Silence of Desire* battle between the double pulls of tradition and modernity, faith and rational thinking—common enough grounds for battle in Indian married life. In *The Golden Honeycomb* she deals with women of the royal families, women sheltered under the princely umbrella during the days of the British Raj. In all her novels, the author sets forth an inspiring goal—autonomy for the self, nurturance for the family and fellow feeling for the community of men and women.

### **The Quest for Autonomy**

The woman in Kamala Markanday's fictional world is on a quest for autonomy. The hindrances that stem from nature, from irregularities in the social system confine her to the time-honoured and taboo-ridden path. In a developing country progress is definable by the law of accumulation, change in social class, the dynamics of investment and return, sowing and reaping, manufacturing and the mechanics of labour and marketing. The economic travails inherent in such a country get complicated further by inexperience; sickness, blind faith in *Karma*, human frailty and mutual distrust. The plight of the average man or woman being tossed about in such a context is evident in Kamala Markandaya's novels. The woman is constantly bracketed with the poorest of the poor in her earlier novels namely *Nectar in a Sieve* and *A Handful of Rice*.

In spite of the author's commitment to social realism, her later novels have multi-layered, narrative rhythms. The three shaping forces, the author's predisposition, the inherent logic of



the aesthetic form and the norms of reality, combined skillfully, produce such memorable portraits of the Indian woman as Meera, Premala, Roshan Vasantha, Saroja, Lalitha, Mohini, Sarojini and Anasuya. These women, unlike Rukmani and Nalini, indicate to us that economic difficulties are only part of what hinders the Indian woman's progress towards full-fledged autonomy. They, like their counterparts in Raja Rao's, Narayan's and Bhattacharya's fictional worlds, seek not only economic independence but also a higher consciousness, a scale of values that would enable them to realise themselves as mature human beings. While Rukmani and Nalini are wrung dry on the rungs of an unjust and unequal economic ladder, their sisters who are better off on the economic front, fair no better. Disillusionment is their ultimate lot and they have little to offer, either to themselves or to the world. In such a context, it is remarkable how most of them cling to the hope of universal sisterhood, of caring for human beings. In other words the desire for autonomy exists side by side with the felt needs of caring and nurturance. Conflict arises only when exclusivity is sought ; if autonomy and nurturance are mutually exclusive, life becomes a game of chance geared towards deception and loss. The opportunity for the growth of universal fellow feeling ceases to exist.

The irony lies in the fact that the Indian woman is usually faced with a choice—the choice between autonomy and nurturance. In either case hers is the Hobson's choice that is bound to lead her to despair. In two decades of living and writing, Kamala Markandaya understands this choice as the final trap of human frustration and yet she continues to affirm through what she calls "the literature of concern" that there lies the possibility of something positive beyond the darkness that either total autonomy or wholly passive nurturance entails. Generally, each of her battered characters—man or woman—finally finds some one to care about or to be taken care of and thereby re-establishes the old homely maxims of love, pity, pride, compassion and sacrifice.

She is the chronicler of the Indian woman's experience

which leads us to believe in the power of caring, of developing a universal fellow feeling, a feeling of sistership with suffering mankind. If Indian womanhood evolves towards this larger concept of love and caring, then there need be no fears about its endurance.

Although the author's concerns are often socio-economic, although she, being serious, lacks the touch of humour and gentle irony that lights up the work of her contemporaries like Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand, she has made her own significant contribution. In an age and society where grimness is but all pervasive; she shows the Indian woman that there are other human beings like herself caught in similar or worse predicaments. The average Indian woman's apparent sense of aloneness vanishes then, her ennui is shaken off and she finds solace in her sisterhood with mankind. This is a great ego-booster and helps her get through.

Kamala Markandaya shows her the strength that lies in identifying herself with her sisters and brothers, fellow travelers in life. Religion is not of any help nor is blind faith; stark truth has to be faced and the sooner the better. Yet she reminds us that we can survive if we have courage, that we can pull ourselves up if we have compassion, that we can with our tenacity of spirit, create a better world wherever we are, whatever we are, in India, in England, as peasant woman Rukmani, as city drudge Nalini, as alien expatriate Vasantia and as feudal princess Mohini.

### **A Clean-Out and a Confessional**

Kamala Markandaya calls for a "clean-out of the entire clutter of distorted and distorting imagery with which we have lumbered ourselves." What would induce such a clean-out, according to her, is "the literature of concern". Literature, she points out, brings to us "the elementary truths of human commonality so that we find we have "an instant neighbour" rather than strange characters "marked THEM."<sup>8</sup> She

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8. Refer P.S. Chauhan, "Kamala Markandaya : Sense and Sensibility"i

constitutive yet fluid concepts as "a good deal of our thinking is by means of concepts." The first is the rejection of binary in favour of plural. Like Friedrich Schlegel, she cites as examples, "at least a half-doll and something like our own terrible history; consideration is necessary for the value of truth to be felt and to be useful. Secondly, the call for "the establishment of meaningful concepts of the human condition." The problem of establishing such concepts is growing with change in different cultures and differing times.

The difficulty lies in the fact that while the old ones are no longer capable of generating enough conviction in actual terms, the newer concepts are found to be uniformly insufficient. Kamala Markandaya finds that though it is the business of the novelist to establish meaningful concepts, in the main, we have been left to assume them from the moral consciousness of our times. Thus, no doubt, has led to a great deal of ambiguity.

However, one writes in against literature that see one on a

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1. It will

- in *The Literary Criticism*, Vol. III (Spring 1970), No. : 1-3, I.L.L. Chandrasekhar, "East and West in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya" in *Indian Language and Indian Writing in English*, ed. S.L.L. State Chandrasekhar, University of Mysore, 1970 : Yogesh Chandra Goudil, "Techniques and Data in 'Journals' of Kamala Markandaya" : June 1970 : S.L. Srinivas, "A Sense of Identity in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya" : *Journals of Kamala Markandaya* (June 1970) : 2-7. Srinivas Rao, *The Indian-English Novel and the Changing Tradition*, Mysore : Rao and Rajagopal, 1972 : Margaret P. Joseph, *Kamala Markandaya: New Delhi* : Arnold Bennemann, 1970 : Madan Mohan Mukherjee, *The Cross-Land Fiction : Themes and Techniques of the Indian Novel in English* (Delhi : Arnold Bennemann, 1971) : Uma Parameswaran, "India for the Western Reader : A Study of Kamala Markandaya's 'Novels' in *Form Quarterly* (Summer 1973) : Robert Jordan, "The Homeric Shepherd", *Southwest Review* (Winter, 1973) : S.L. Srinivas Rao, "Some Notes on the Plot of Kamala Markandaya's Novels", *Indian Literature Quarterly* 1970 : Vinodha Rao, "Indian Equivalence", *Journals of Kamala Markandaya* (April 1970) : Srinivas Venkateswaram, "The Language of Kamala Markandaya's Novels", in *The Literary Criticism* (Winter 1970).

“do-gooding path deliberately for the didactic novelists is a poor novelist.” It may be difficult to understand from the comparative standpoint of secure welfare—society living and her own personal background, her passionate involvement in her fiction with the oppressed, the old and the dying. Her compatriots have accused her of leading an alien, money-insulated, urbanised and above all, westernised, ivory-tower-type of existence that has little in common with the lot of the average Indian woman. Her marriage with a foreigner and her residence abroad queers the pitch further. Her accounts of the poor peasant woman as well as the slum dweller have been found fault with as having patches of narration which do not ring true. She has also been accused of tailoring her material to fit a Western public. Her constant negative account of Indian life, and her seemingly facile equation of evil with economic backwardness as portrayed in so many of her novels, have also been disputed. However, as an artist she sincerely believes in the universal sisterhood/brotherhood of man and that her writing systematically espouses the cultivation of warm, caring human relationships cannot be denied. What Mrs. Pickering felt for poor old Srinivas is applicable to her creator too.

She does not stop at the socio-economic levels. Her concern extends further. She is well aware that the world's cycles of change, often at their gloomiest, bring on war or other economic and political upheavals leaving human beings in fright more than ever before. Many cease to strive for a higher and better mode of living, and they hover on the brink between indifference and violence, destruction and deathlike ennui. Yet Kāmala Markandaya does not waver in her vision of a better world where men and women can live and work together harmoniously, developing a higher level of consciousness by means of a closer and constant sharing of meaningful concepts, meaningful to the human condition. She herself proclaims her philosophy as a writer in her paper : “Literature provides the resonance that lingers in the mind long after the last headline has fled from the memory. While it lingers,

there is neither black nor white, nor capitalist nor communist ; there is only the human brotherhood."<sup>9</sup>

### Autonomy for Rukmani

Rukmini in *Nectar in a Sieve* exemplifies the large mass of underprivileged women in rural India. Their backs are bent with unrewarded labour and they are hardly ever written about for their problems are not of interest to urban readers. Rukmani and her peasant family face every conceivable problem brought on by a cruel fate and an equally cruel, unjust social order. The author not only brackets the poor and the woman but also shows us how the distortions in the existing social and economic order affect women most. Krishna Ahooja Patel quotes the revealing statistics :

Women constitute half of the world population and one third of the official labour force, perform nearly two thirds of the hours worked but according to some estimates (based on UN, ILO statistics) received only one tenth of the world income and possess less than one hundredth of the world property.<sup>10</sup>

Just as the poorer nations of the world are struggling through conflict and confrontation for an equitable share of man's worldly goods so also are women all over the world battling for a redistribution of privilege and power and property between men and women. Through Rukmani the author indicts a harsh and unjust society which restricts and exploits womanhood. Her indictment is on the same lines as the well known charge sheet drawn up by Mary Wollstonecraft in 1792. Both accuse society for making woman what she is—a meek, subordinate second rate being—instead of what she should be—an equal, full fledged partner of man.

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9. Dorothy Blair Shimer, "Sociological Imagery in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya", pp. 358-59.

10. Krishna Ahooja Patel, "Another Development for Women" in *Approaches and Strategies*, ed. Marc Nerfin (Uppsala, The Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, 1977), p. 66.

In her novels, especially so in this earliest one, Kamala Markandaya not only pleads for a proper distribution of privilege, power and property between men and women: she raises a passionate cry on behalf of plain humanity. The injustice of sexism is, according to her, as glaring as that of racism. In her article entitled "Reminiscences of Rural India" she writes that she is astonished at the peasant Everyman's stupefying degree of endurance and resignation.<sup>11</sup> If the peasant is Everyman, then, by logical extension, the peasant woman is Everywoman—here she is Rukmani. In Rukmani's story of one rural family's struggle against adversity and search for self respect and autonomy is mirrored the collective history of the rural women of India.

Rukmani exemplifies the poor rural woman who works long hours, longer than the man, in low paid or non-paying jobs with backward technologies. She tells us how she was married off at the age of twelve to a poor tenant farmer, Nathan. The advent of industrialism in the rural area, the expansion of a shoddy tannery which swallows up all arable lands, the advent of drought and famine, the necessity of bringing up a large family on meagre and unsteady income—all these drive the couple to the verge of utter despair. A son dies in the tannery labour strike and another goes away to Ceylon as indentured labourer. A third son vanishes into the city nearby. Ira or Irawaddy, their only daughter, a pretty and well behaved girl, is married off by them to a neighbouring villager's son. Despite the saving and scrimping and despite the dowry that Rukmani manages to put by for her, her marriage ends in failure because of her barrenness.

Ira's husband sends her home to her parents and coolly takes another bride. The poor girl seeing her family starve during the famine turns into a woman of the streets, and irony of all ironies, gives birth to an illegitimate albino child. Nathan gets evicted from the land he had farmed for over

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11. Markandaya, "Reminiscences of Rural India" in *John Kenneth Galbraith Introduces India* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1974), p. 109.

thirty years. The couple, old and enfeebled, go to the city looking for their sons and end up, losing their meagre belongings to stone breakers in a quarry. The work is harsh, the weather cold and rainy and Nathan succumbs to a heart attack. Rukmani, just over forty, widowed, returns to the village with an adopted orphan boy, back to Ira and there is a hint of better times to come with the English doctor Neelimer's clinic being established in the village. Rukmani joins him in serving the needy and the sick and strangely enough, despite all her suffering, seems to be looking forward to a fully lived and contented old age.

'Contentment' is perhaps an inappropriate word. Resignation is her lot in life would fit more correctly. Yet Rukmani being a resilient figure, look forward to caring for the needy and the sick in her village in a positive way. Her contentment springs from the fact that she no longer has to dazzle to retain a husband's favour: *vis-a-vis* Kunti, she no longer has to struggle alone to keep the kitchen fire going, she is no longer obsessed about the fetish of bringing up a male child; she has willing and enlightened hands to shore her up, at least in her old age. In essence, her contentment, if it can be called so, springs from her caring for her fellow human beings. Her quest for autonomy, her felt needs of nurturance all end in the culminating point of her kinship with the world at large.

Rukmani, however, has to travel a long and hazardous road before she reaches this stage. In her we see the social and economic forces in conflict. There is always the clash between the old and the new, the poor and the rich, the East and the West, between religion and science and between men and women. Though the English doctor tries hard to prod her sensitivity, her thinking, she remains passive and pathetic for too long. She does not realise the tragedy of her life, nor does she try to alleviate the suffering until it is too late. Her daughter Ira's life and marriage could have been salvaged with a little bit of timely help on her part. Yet she chooses to rest passive with her religion as her cure—all until it is too

late. When Kenny rails at her, "Acquiescent imbeciles...do you think spiritual grace comes from being in want, or from suffering?" she is bewildered. Her religion has taught her 'to bear our sorrows in silence and all this is so that the soul may be cleansed.'

Her folk, rooted to the soil, have been conditioned for centuries, by the vagaries of the climate and the money lenders. Her attitude of passive acceptance, fuelled by economic insecurity and religious tenets is hard to break. Dr. Kennington's concepts, Western and scientific, are totally new and radical and it takes quite some time for her to absorb them. She accepts him finally, only warily: "A strange nature, only partly within my understanding. A man half in shadow half in light, defying knowledge" (p. 100). He, on his part says, "I go when I am tired of your follies and stupidities, your eternal shameful poverty. I can only take you people in small doses." Rukmani sums up the traditional attitude towards suffering: "We are in God's hands." (p. 131). She cannot fight back much as he urges her, for according to her, to fight back against a pre-ordained set-up is futile, to cry out for help is a sign of weakness. We are made aware of the differences between the Eastern and Western attitude towards suffering.

### **The Degradation of the Female**

Prejudice against the woman is neatly woven into the fabric of daily life. When she gives birth to Ira, Rukmani sheds "tears of weakness and disappointment for what woman wants a girl for her first born?" (p. 25). The mother, in order to realize herself and achieve status in society, has to be the harbinger of sons. Nathan shares in this fetish about the superiority of a male child: "Nathan at first paid scant attention to her: he had wanted a son to continue his line and walk beside him on the land, not a pulling infant who would take with her a dowry and leave nothing but a memory behind." (p. 27).



The trouble came for a son. "But the gods have other plans for us. They cannot attend to the pleas of every suppliant who turns to him for aid or to heaven." (p. 30) Rukmani, desperate for male heirs, crosses the social taboo in consulting a female doctor, especially a foreign one. Dr. Cunningham helps her with her medical science and he succeeds where her prayers were of no avail. Ironically Rukmani begins one can alter at once when the fortunes of the family are on the downward trend and she has scarcely the means to feed her cherished and over-revered male heir.

The odds are heavily against the female even at birth. She is not welcome, she does not get the opportunities that the son of the family gets. Educating her is held to be wasteful, akin to watering a neighbour's tree. She is regarded as somebody else's (her husband's) property: hence why waste time and money educating her? Oddly enough, Rukmani, being a favourite child of her own parents, learns to read and write, something unusual for her times and her position in life. Yet her literacy is of no use to her. Many walls go up when she desperately seeks a job to bring some money home for the beleaguered family. She sets herself up as a letter writer. As Nathan predicted, there simply are no customers for a woman reader and writer of letters. With the usual pathetic female hope, she waits patiently: "If I ask little and less than others, perhaps there will surely be said I." (p. 150). But Nathan is right. Rukmani, who brings the precious gift of literacy to her children, cannot make use of it to help herself.

For Isa, even the all too few pleasures of peasant life with a full harvest and a baby on her hip are not to be. A quiet, shy girl, calmly to look at, she is married off with a dowry of a hundred rupees, the maximum that her parents could afford. But Isa is sent home, accused of being barren, "a failure, a woman who cannot even bear a child." To Rukmani, this is a dreadful turn of events: "All this (the charge of barrenness) I had gone through—the torment, the anxiety. Now the whole dreadful story was repeating itself and it was my daughter this time." (p. 72).

Rukmani takes Ira to be treated by Dr. Kenny. It is, however, too late. Ira's husband has already married another and Ira is left to fend for herself the rest of her lifetime like old, destitute Granny of the sacks, who eked out a life selling vegetables in the village. Ira, the pretty, well-behaved Ira, could have no home of her own. With "stony eyes" and "strange ways" she withdraws "into that chill hopelessness that daunted me", says her mother. (p. 74). She broods and is resentful at her mother's latest pregnancy.

Once the child Kuti is born, her feminine instinct of nurturance takes precedence over hurt and sorrow and resentment. She takes care of her youngest brother as if he were her own son. During the bitter days of the famine, she walks the streets in order to bring him food. When Nathan castigates her as a "harlot", 'a common strumpet', she sticks firmly to her new found job: "Tonight and tomorrow and every night; so long as there is need. I will not hunger any more." (p. 137). Rukmani adds: "She was no longer a child, to be cowed or forced into submission, but a grown woman with a definite purpose and an invincible determination. We had for so long accepted her obedience to our will that when it ceased to be given naturally, it came a considerable shock; yet there was no option but to accept the change, strange and bewildering as it was, for obedience cannot be extorted." (p. 138).

Ira, who was deprived of a normal married life and domesticity on account of barrenness, gives birth to an albino child soon after she became a street walker. Dr. Kenny exclaims: "One goes from one end of the world to the other to hear the same story. Does it matter what people say?" It matters very much indeed, especially in a small, tradition bound village. Dr. Kenny, with all his generous heart, cannot understand the ways of Indians. Rukmani says, "But this is not your country and we are not your people. If you lived here your whole life, it still would not be." (p. 149). This is echoed by Srinivas too in *The Nowhere Man*. Universal brotherhood or sisterhood is not an easily attainable goal.

Ira, in the meantime, is saddled with an illegitimate child with an off appearance. Rukmani says wearily : "Whose is the blame then ? ... Blame the wind and the rain and the sun and the earth ; they cannot refute it, they are the culprits." (p. 162). If Rukmani could be so resilient she can be trusted with moulding Ira's wayward life into some useful form, useful to herself and to her society, later on, towards the close of the novel. The only tragic feeling we have is one of wanton waste : So much could have been done positively by Ira and Rukmani, in her resilience, in her powers of endurance, prudence and diligence, is head and shoulders above Nathan. Even his marital infidelity she takes in her stride. "My husband was one of those men", she states flatly when Kunthi, his paramour, tries to blackmail her with knowledge of this affair with Nathan during the famine in return for her buried measure of rice. The knowledge of her husband's betrayal shocks her, human as she is : "Disbelief first, disillusionment, anger, reproach, pain. To find out after so many years, in such a cruel way." (p. 120).

Rukmani, in her youth, in all her innocence had not suspected in all these years. She pays scant heed to her good neighbour Kali's warning : "She (Kunthi) has fire in her body ; men burn before and after." Yet she overcomes this betrayal on the part of her husband. Kunthi's veiled threats linking Rukmani with Kenny also cease to be threatening with the clearing of all lingering doubts and suspicions between aging couple. Poor they may be, yet Rukmani prevails and her marriage endures. She says : "A new peace came to us then, freed at last from the necessity for lies and concealment and deceit, with the fear betrayal lifted from us, and with the power we ourselves had given her wrested finally from Kunthi." (p. 120).

Nathan is now hers, completely : "You are a good wife," he murmured. "I would not have any other." (p. 112). Later, at the stone quarry when he feels his life is slipping away, he asks Rukmani : "Have we not been happy together ? (p. 252).

Rukmani speaks of his death as a 'gentle passing': "His gentle spirit withdrew and the light went out in his eyes." (p. 252). It seems a Pyrrhic victory, after all. Given better circumstances, what might not have they achieved, this gentle couple. What Kenny says seems to be appropriate: "There is no grandeur in want or in endurance. Go, before I too am entangled in your philosophies." (p. 155). The degradation that the female is subject to, right from birth puts her in constant suffering and dependence. Where then is the possibility of autonomy? Yet with their inborn gentleness, the likes of Ira and Rukmani care and nurture all around them, even under the worst of circumstances.

Rukmani, with husband dying and herself reduced to a stone breaker, takes charge of the poor Puli, the orphan suffering from leprosy. She brings him back to the village, gets him treated by Dr. Kenny and sets him up on his feet. Ira, ever a quiet, religious girl, strays from the straight path not because of any fire consuming her as in the case of Kunthi. She does so solely to feed the little Kuti who dies painfully, slowly for want of milk. The woman's capacity for nurturance, for caring for her fellow human beings gets stifled mainly because of the imbalances inherent in an unjust social order. It is the author's concern that enables us to see the futility of suffering.

### **Autonomy of Nalini ?**

Rukmani seems to be relatively free as compared to Nalini in *A Handful of Rice*, Rukmani, at least, is used to, in her own words, "open fields and the sky and the unfettered sight of the sun."<sup>12</sup> (p. 69). The freedom that peasant women enjoy, despite poverty and the bonds of village life, is limited. Even this seems to be denied to Nalini. Hers is a living death, a death

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12. Rukmani compares herself with the Muslim women in purdah and considers herself luckier. See Markandaya, *Nectar in a Sieve*, p. 69. For a good account of the purdah and how it operates in the Hindu joint family, see Rama Mehta, *Inside the Haveli* (New Delhi : Arnold Heinemann, 1977).



Kamala Markandaya is pre-occupied with the social forces at work. Disenchantment is a major theme in her novels and here we find it in Ravi, in Nalini, in Jayamma and Apu, her parents. The wisest seems to be Ram, Ravi's father, who has passed the stage of feeling anguish or envy due to the thorough grounding in acceptance he had undergone: "He knew that his lot could not, would not, be and better. Now he preferred to husband his strength rather than to expend it in the meaningless eroding anguish of grudging another man what he could not have." (p. 54). He is in tune with the other writers in this study, namely Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan.

Frustration and constant denial affect the young couple like a deficiency disease. There is Damodar beckoning Ravi into anti-social acts like hoarding, smuggling, illegal liquor and there is his own sense of integrity, of doing right as a husband, and a responsible householder. His intention to stick to the righteous path is interpreted as weakness by Damodar. The righteous way is not the easy way; business troubles multiply with Apu's death, income is reduced greatly, his son dies of meningitis due to lack of timely medical aid, his wife consequently is estranged from him and he fights a losing battle for survival.

In this battle for life, one has to grab or go under. Since Ravi and Nalini do not choose to grasp, they lose heavily. And Nalini, gentle by nature, accepts adversity passively: "Nalini took it stoically. She was used to obedience and saw no point in banging her head against a stone wall." (p. 121). Yet their early married life though hedged in by poverty, is pictured as an idyll when contrasted with their life later on. Jayamma, Nalini's mother, is fully cognisant of this important factor in her married life: "She (Jayamma) had been young, he (Apu) past his prime when they married her to him. She did not love him then, she did not love him afterward, she did not even know that she didn't because she did not know what it meant... It was not until much later, living in the same house as the bridegroom picked for her daughter and seeing their sated sexual faces, that she realised her other loss. She was then in the prime of her life." (p. 149).

Nalini is better off than her mother and better off than poor Thangam, her star-crossed sister, married to Puzuma, a good for nothing thieving lecher about town. "Thangam had ragged, cried, suffered and in the end put a bold cheerful face on it: What else could she do? But the hurt was plain to see..." (p. 175). When Puzuma robs Agn of his sister's hoard of savings, and is discovered as the thief he is asked to leave the house. Thangam, like any other wife has to follow such with her children. Nalini does not face these humiliations: but her lot is not easy either.

### Tomorrow, Yes, Tomorrow

Ravi had given up his wayward way of life and tried to be worthy of Nalini. But he is plagued with shortage of money, money needed to run his household, money to pay his wife's hospital bills and to rear his children. He unleashes his frustration on his poor wife who bears his brutalising her passively like a cow being led to the sacrificial altar. He slaps her, treats her with bitter words, commits incest with her mother and makes life miserable for the entire family. His faith in human rights, his belief in a better future, in hard work and prosperity have all vanished into thin air. His wife has to bear the brunt of his disillusionment with the world.

To Nalini's credit, it must be said that she bears him with a saint's understanding spirit: "Nalini never complained. She had seen her fighting for breath or covertly rubbing oil into the brick marks on her abdomen or arching her back against the cold granite grating stone, but she had never heard her complain. Neither of the life of her grandparents, nor of him." (p. 185).

She comes back from the hospital a day after the twin girls were delivered and takes up her usual household tasks without fuss though she feels ill and aching. But Ravi could hardly take notice, obsessed as he is with the family hurtling downward towards total destruction financially: "He seldom now proclaimed the inviolable rights of human beings as he had once done, nor spoke of the retribution they were entitled to

exact if these were violated ; he felt rather less passionate over them and accepted passively much that he knew he should have forcibly rejected. It diminished him. He knew that too but felt too beaten to reach for the justice and dignity that had once given him stature." (p. 201).

He could not respect the dignity of his wife as a fellow human, being under such a cynical frame of mind. Nalini retreats into terrified silence.—Feeding the entire family on a straitened budget is a formidable task :

It would mean asking him for extra money, and perhaps he would shout at her, she thought, take her by the shoulders and shake her while he shouted as he often did ; and it made her feel afraid and a little sick. She frequently felt this way and she wondered bleakly, what it would be like to have no fears at all, like a memsahib say, who could not have any fears about milk or money or the future, or the heavy hand of a moody husband. (p. 202).

Where then is the point of seeking autonomy ? Nalini is like a terrified doe and when Ravi accuses her of infidelity and throws her out, she goes to stay with her sister Thangam. In the long bitter struggle for existence, her volition has been eroded completely. When Ravi comes to call her back, she obeys him unquestioningly. Damodar taunts Ravi : "You are empty, no heart, no spleen, no lights, no guts ; something's been at them." (p. 232). Ravi, longing for material prosperity, is now willing to swallow his idealism and do Damodar's bidding. But he is now considered unfit. Nalini too is equally spineless—she cannot function as an autonomous being, having been ground down in the mill of suffering.

At novel's end we see Ravi with jagged brick in hand, ready with the mob to hit and destroy rich men's houses. Yet, at the last moment, he draws back with his characteristic postponement of the issue : "But tomorrow, yes tomorrow." The author leaves us with the suspicion that there are to be no more tomorrows either for him or for his wife. There is no redemption envisaged for them. Universal brotherhood and comradeship are strange tenants in a harsh, unjust economic



order. Nalini's quest for autonomy gets transformed into a protected struggle for survival. When existence itself is at stake, the question of independence, of autonomy for the spirit does not arise. Nalini, like Ravi, is shown to be at the beck and call of an unjust social system; the novel serves as an indictment against it. Given the elements that constitute a fruitful and lasting union, Nalini and Ravi could have lived happily, usefully, but for their economic ills. The author raises a passionate cry against a system that negates human beings.

### **Autonomy under Foreign Rule : Roshan**

*Some Inner Fury* chronicles the tensions in three women's lives, tensions arising from uncertain political rather than economic, circumstances. In Rukmani and Nalini we see the degradations that a woman is subject to, mainly because of economic ills. Here Kamala Markandaya shows us, money alone is not sufficient to ensure the happiness, the well being, of the women concerned. The women here, Premala, Mira, and Roshan, each in her own way, is well brought up, and equipped with all the comforts of material well being. Yet self-fulfilment is as long and hazardous a trekking for them as for their poorer sisters. They are equally the victims of circumstances beyond their control better equipped though they be with wealth and education. They prove Kamala Markandaya's theory that the women's sufferings stem not because of her but because of inherent imbalances in the social order. Like Roshan, every woman needs to re-educate herself and remould the people around her. It is up to the resources of the individual to withstand the conflicting social forces and seek some meaning, some independence out of life. Roshan is successful in this, Mira is ambivalent and Premala fails completely.

Roshan Merchant, the rich mill owner's daughter, is first met as a guest at Kit's wedding, "in a chiffon sari coloured like a rainbow and slippers with rhinestone heels, and a mouth as bright and vivid as a geranium petal." (p 47). She is the most striking and unusual woman in the novel. Everyone likes her despite her unusualness. She was frank, educated, talented and

motivated towards an inspiring goal—that of winning freedom for her country in an enlightened way. Mira says : “There was something about her that was turbulent and unafraid which you sensed beneath the light, sparkling surface she presented ; and I admired her because she stood alone and thought nothing of it.” (p. 49).

Roshan had married—we are told her ex-husband is now an influential member of the government but as she admits to Mira and her mother “My husband and I have parted company.....We haven’t lived together for years. We used to squabble like anything when we did, but now—funny thing—we’re the best of friends.” She is too honest and too lazy to keep up any deception and this frankness appealed to young people, not to the older generation. She is a challenge to age old conventional upbringing. She does everything that a well brought up girl is not supposed to do. She switches professions with airy ease. We hear of her as a poetess and fellow student in college, through Kit. Next she is a columnist—then she buys up the paper she writes for. She does not allow prudence to dictate her. She goes where her heart leads her and whichever direction she takes, she goes wholeheartedly into it and makes a success of whatever she is doing. She is the pioneer who points the way. The elders in the novel are worried that she would lead the younger people into strange uneasy paths but she is magnetic and her appeal to Mira, Govind, even steady Kit and shy Premala is irresistible.

She is a born leader not only as Roshan merchant, the England returned rich Parsi girl but also as the freedom fighter who believes in non-violence. We see her again, “in the cheapest of homespun saris, with her hair more brown than black with dust, and again in prison without a trace of make-up and her skin beginning to show the effects of coarse soap and lack of sunlight ; and always wherever she was and in whatever company, Roshan was the one who arrested attention.” (pp. 47-48).

Roshan, like Narayan’s Daisy, is a unique role model for the other women around her. Even Mira’s mother who does

not appreciate a girl living away from her husband, grudgingly accommodates her for she is, according to the older woman, 'ultra modern' but not aggressively so, 'forward' without being conscious of it, so that she did not irritate the people around her, young and old. Her birth and her education gives her untold advantages ; that she uses them in a mature way for the good of her fellow human beings, stands to her credit. Mira says appreciatively :

The comparative freedom which was hers by birth had been augmented during her education abroad to a greater degree than most other women of her class enjoyed ; and on her return home, what it still lacked of full measure she had appropriated for herself without vaunt or notion of defiance. It was this same ruthless simplicity, as I was to discover, that she always looked at things, so that walls fell and veils lifted, and somehow when you were with her she lent you her vision, and you saw things as they were. (p. 64).

Roshan's pursuit of autonomy is to be viewed in a wider perspective. She battles for autonomy for all Indians though hers is the path of pacific resistance as opposed to Govind who believes in terrorism as the means of liberation. Her attitude is always constructive ; witness the appropriateness of the scale model of a dam on her desk. She tells Govind firmly : "There is no power in violence...only destruction...I am not really interested in destruction." (p. 86). Yet when Govind is arrested as a terrorist, she is willing to bail him out, vouching a sound alibi for him ; she swears unhesitatingly in the court that he had spent the night in question with her. She is truly a remarkable woman, a remarkable human being.

Being a prisoner does not clip her wings. She is not sorry, she knows there is no going back and she has no regrets. She tells Mira : "Of course I am not sorry ! I'd rather go to the devil my own way than be led to heaven by anyone else. And I wouldn't give up being free like that for anything.... It hasn't always been that way—no, not even for me !" (p. 128). Behind a locked door in a cell, she still keeps her autonomous spirit. As she herself hints, she has persisted in her quest for

freedom in spite of objections from her father, in spite of the sacrifices involved—the loss of a close companion in life, of family and children, the immediate pleasures of nurturance within the home that every ordinary woman aspires for. She transfers her desire for nurturance to the national framework.

It is her imaginative sympathy for her fellow human beings irrespective of differences in class, sex and religion (Roshan is not a Hindu—she is a Parsi by birth), that makes her a natural leader. In a moment of extreme stress, when the Indian mob is about to force a violent confrontation with the British rulers inside the courtroom, when Govind, on trial for the murder of Kit, is accused by Hickey, the English Missionary and the crowd is enraged—at that moment, it is Roshan who act with great presence of mind. Calm and collected, she ascends the dock, and haranguing, diverts the crowd from massacre and pillage—instead, thanks to her, the crowd ‘liberates’ Govind and carries him away in a triumphant procession.

Roshan illustrates Kamala Markandaya’s commitment to issues larger than private consciousness and woman’s grievances. Writing with a longing for moral coherence that transcends barriers of sex, religion, politics and economic conditions, she shows us through Roshan that it is possible to reconcile the need for personal freedom with the larger concept of national and eventually global freedom. The egotism that is associated with feminists seeking liberation with their battle for ERA, abortion and equal economic opportunity, the egotism that often comes close to the patriarchal chauvinism they criticise, this egotism is averted by the woman’s imaginative sympathy for the whole community. Autonomy is not restricted to the self—it is demanded for the entire community of human beings.

Roshan with her quest for freedom for all, in spirit and in body, personally and nationally, serves as an excellent role model for the other women in the novel. Mira acknowledges her debt to her: “She gave me the chance to go and I took it... I discovered at last the gateway to the freedom of the mind, and gazed entranced upon that vista of endless extensions of which the spirit is capable.” (p. 49). Roshan is the best

know of a row of enlightened women in Kamala Markandaya's fictive world. She is followed by Mira, Anasuya, Vasantha, Mohini, Sarojini and Usha but she is easily the most outstanding of all. In her we find the feminine need for nurturing transcending narrow personal realms and encompassing entire humanity. As such the inevitable conflict between the woman's desire for independence and her need for caring is obviated.

### **The Opposite Pole : Premala**

If Roshan symbolises modern 'progressive' womanhood, Premala stands for the traditional concept of the Indian woman. Roshan helps Mira have an image of herself with power with volition. Premala admires her equally but is unable to translate her desire for assertiveness into her daily life. She is traditionally brought up and her engagement with Kit's is fixed by the elders in the two families. Kit's mother running a dual household is emancipated enough to ask her son anxiously : "The girl pleases you ? You think your mother has chosen well ?" (p. 40).

The same freedom of choice is not offered to Premala. She knows her parents desire this alliance with Kit. She tries to remould herself to please his anglicised tastes. Despite both being Hindus, born in the same milieu, Premala comes from a conservative family. Kit with his education in England, his anglicised household and his civil service status is thoroughly British in outlook and way of living. He prefers the club, the formal sit down dinners and tennis. She is fond of veena playing, reading the Gita, and is domestic bound, modest, with her painting of miniatures and musical hymns. Cultural disparities between the two estrange them. It is only Premala who makes a constant effort to bridge the gap and she fails at every step. One wonders how fruitful their lives would have been if they had been matched elsewhere—she with the strong, silent, revolutionary patriot Govind and he, with 'the silken haired Sylvia', 'a girl I used to know' as he tells his sister Mira.

Yet they are united in marriage and Mira states : "Though

she tried desperately, she plainly found it difficult to adapt herself to him." (p. 37). She is like a child, innocent, unfledged, unskilled in the art of concealment and, without defenses, gets hurt repeatedly. Govind who watches her ordeal, cannot be indifferent to it like the others. Mira's parents keep silent; Mira tells us: "To them it was wholly proper that Premala should wait upon their son's pleasure." (p. 39).

Govind, moved by his love for this poor girl tells her: "It is not a vital matter—this of moving among the English." Yet Premala takes it as a wifely duty: "I would make a poor wife if I did not." It is Govind who appreciates her gentle, unassuming pleasing ways—not Kit. That she is temperamentally unsuitable to wed Kit escapes the notice of the elders. She came from the right caste, her parents have the right connections, and the ability to give a proper dowry, she is good to look at, obedient and seventeen years old, the right age, according to the family's chatterbox, Dodamma, "in her first bloom, supple and soft to delight a man." (p. 39). These are qualifications good enough to be august Kit's partner in life in the eyes of the two families.

Premala, gentle and docile, even if she finds the proceedings of the wedding, the rituals and the relatives trying, keeps quiet. In the true traditional manner, she, being aware of the satisfactions her wedding gave to the families concerned, sacrifices all thoughts of personal freedom and happiness, for the satisfaction of the other family members. She is deeply religious—she is in deep accord with the religious part of the wedding ceremony. Witness her praying with desperate entreaty like a child, closing her eyes, lost to the world, the moment before Kit ties the wedding strings around her neck. (p. 50). She believes in the sanctity of the marriage, she believes in abiding by her *Dharma* as a wife—hence she tramples her own identity as a being in her heroic effort to please her husband and master. Her tragedy is brought about not by timidity—but the very traditional sense of duty and devotion. Maria Clara like, she wants to do her duty by her husband, by the elders in the family at all costs, at the cost of all personal achievement or autonomy of spirit.

This girl who is Indian to the core is asked to set up a house in a far away town, far removed for the milieu she grew up in and loved. In a house run by a cook and a butler, she seems content to accept whatever they do. With time on her hands and not knowing what to do, she finds life dull and full of frustrations. She lacks the social graces, the breezy informality that make Kit so popular among his English peers. Entertaining them at home is dreaded by her for her ineptitude, her guacherie hang like deadweight between the husband and the wife. What she is proficient in—Indian music, painting, cooking plus a thousand tender nuances that the Indian girl—wife is capable of—these find no appreciation from Kit.

Within a year of married life they drift slowly apart. Added to this disparity in their temperaments in the frequent presence of Govind who loves her truly and yet does not, cannot give expression to it; he knows, being traditional, such a confession on his part, would shatter her completely yet her feminine instinct enables her to guess at the true nature of his feelings towards her, for she refers to it obliquely, to Mira, her husband's sister.

Into this empty life comes the chance of doing some community-welfare-work in a village. She attaches herself to the school in the village and she brings up an orphan girl, though Kit disapproves of it. She could never learn to be tough and she gives up, one by one, the lights and colours of happiness. This little orphan fulfils her need for nurturance, for caring that she desperately desires. In Premala we see her need for caring surpassing her quest for autonomy.

She tries her best to care for Kit too. He being poles apart, cannot be reached by her. Mira analyses the situation: "If she had not loved Kit so much, she would not have tried so hard to please him; and the very earnestness of her endeavour, the award conciliatory concentration with which she strove to do the right thing, would have driven many a man more patient than Kit to irritation." (p. 97).

Kit too is bewildered. At one stage he asks his sister: "I

don't know what's wrong with her. Is it me ? Do you know ?" (p. 100). So much for an arranged marriage which leaves both the partners hurt and bewildered. He finds his solace in his circle of friends, his work ; she goes to the village, works with Kenny the missionary in the village school and tries to drown her misery and revive her parched spirit in bringing up a child. Kit worries about what people would say to an unknown child being brought up in his home. Premala does not mind—to her goodness of heart is the only thing that matters. The village school becomes more of a home to her as she and the orphan girl as accepted there more readily ; "for she could find no place in the one her husband inhabited." (p. 166).

Govind loves Premala, Premala loves Kit and Kit loves Sylvia—it is a tangle of love that is difficult to sort out except by the final resolution of death. Long before Premala dies in the fire started in the village by the freedom fighters, her marriage had become void. Mira says sadly, on her return from holiday with Richard : "So it had even come to this, that they agreed to go their separate ways, tacitly acknowledging thus the imperfect articulation of their marriage." (p. 151).

With Premala dead in the fire, Kit and Govind hurl accusations against one another with Mira, the narrator, pinned as a helpless witness to the inexorable turn of events. Govind accuses Kit : "She loved you ; you never loved her—you do not even know the meaning of love. You gave her nothing—not even a home. You drove her to the village—you drove her to her death." (p. 162). But Kit is not willing to accept the blame. His own hurt was too deep for him to see the wounds of another, for him to practice restraint and forbearance. He tells Govind : "You are as guilty of her death as if you had strangled her with your own hands." (p. 163).

In the ensuing commotion, Kit is stabbed in the back and Govind stands accused of Kit's murder. Kit dies in Mira's hands, whispering his English lover's name before he breathes his last. "Only I knew that he meant, and in that moment I saw her again, the silken-haired girl my brother had known



whose face I had almost forgotten." (p. 163). Two lives have been blighted through a mismatch in matrimony. Kit and Premala have so much of potential in them that their deaths seem a wanton waste. In a sense, when Mira's mother says that "People are always alone" (p. 165), she strikes the right chord. Marriage in such a setup, a marriage performed and struck to, to please everybody, except the principal partners in the union, does not mean companionship. It excludes human warmth, caring and understanding, the very essence of humanity that Kamala Markandaya emphasises in her novels. Here there is no drawing of flesh to flesh and thereby a—calling of the spirit. Each goes his/her lonely way. Each individual has finally to draw upon his/her own resources to face up to life. Premala does not have adequate resources of will power to stand up to her beliefs in life and Kit is also sucked into the whirlpool that opens up with her death.

In Premala the author shows the insecurity, isolation, bewilderment and vulnerability that the traditionally brought up Indian woman feels, when she has to adjust to Western norms of living, when she has to accommodate the tastes and values of a culture in flux. She cannot confront a group-oriented male dominated society head-on as Roshan does. Being sensitive and gentle by nature, she is overwhelmed by harsh reality. She tries to be an ideal wife and companion to her husband. She ends up being a non person and her death puts a stop to her desperate adjustments, to her soul shrinking compromises.

### **Autonomy for Mira**

Mira, the narrator of *Some Inner Fury* is a more interesting character than Premala. In Mira we find the adolescent Indian girl changing into a fully mature woman, ready to meet the challenges of life under a dual hierarchy, the Indian and the English. She is, no doubt, more fortunate in her birth and upbringing—she belongs to a wealthy family used to the Eastern and Western ways of living. Her parents, more emancipated than most people of their generation, give her the supportive influences of a college education and freedom

of speech and behaviour, unheard of for other girls of her age. Her innate liveliness, curiosity in other ways of thought and living, and an alert bubbling nature attract not only Richard Marlowe but also the reader. She is the objective narrator of the events in the novel and despite her neutral stance, she lets us know where her own sympathies lie in a forthright manner. She is the forerunner of other enlightened observers like Anasuya and Usha.

She does not forget the place the woman is given in the traditional Indian family despite her exposure to Western ideas and way of living. It is precisely because of her dual vision that she is able to appreciate Roshan and emulate her and at the same time sympathise with Premala's predicament. Early in the novel, observing Kit and Premala, she tells us : "There is a tradition perhaps not only in India, that women should not be worried, that the best way to ensure this, is to keep them as far as possible in ignorance." (p. 79). Then she adds : "Certain domains belong to men alone and Indian women learn early not to encroach. Kit knew he would not have to remind Premala a second time." (p. 80). It is hard to visualize Mira abiding by these and similar rules.

Awareness of the conventions and restrictions that surround her enables her to perceive the restrictions under which her lover Richard operates : "The conventions of his caste were no less rigid than mine : he came of a race which had acquired an empire..." (p. 109). Yet both, unlike Kit and Prem, have the wit and the nerve to overcome such restrictions. While Premala wilts at the dinner table, Mira enjoys the best of both worlds, the Indian and the English : "Being with Richard was pleasure in itself, but besides, he knew what to do and say and took you with him, so that you were free to enjoy yourself ; and moreover, if you blundered, he did not mind : and when your companion does not mind, blunders lose their enormity and dwindle and shrink to nothing, for indeed in themselves they are nothing."

Richard, too, is adaptable. He waits patiently for three years for Mira to grow up and then he abides by the conven-

tions of her family. He goes to her mother to ask for her formal permission to marry Mira. The mother, wisely, deflects them from their purpose : she asks them to wait until Mira turns twenty-one years of age. Had she said no, had she said the times were unstable, that the political future in the country was uncertain, that they were of different races and hence incompatible and that they felt infatuation and not love for one another, she would have been overwhelmed by their combined powers of persuasion and tact. She wisely tells them merely to wait—she, however, gives them the conditional permission to marry : “If he (Richard) has to go” my mother said, “I will not stand in your way.” (p. 111). As events turn out, within a year, the freedom struggle pits them in opposite camps. She is Hindu Indian and loves her country and Richard being English, is the enemy. *The twain shall never meet*. Despite their adaptability and mutual attraction, despite their comparative ease of social behaviour, they cannot eventuate their relationship into a happy wedded union. Their love is torn usunder by the strong current of the struggle for Indian independence sweeping across the land. Kipling’s dictum of ‘The East is East and the West is West’ and the twain shall never meet proves to be true in this instance. The West intruded into Premala’s life. One of the primary reasons for the incompatibility between Kit and Prem is the fact that Prem, like Govind, could not participate in the codes and customs of an alien culture. She could not be the product of a culture which is not her own. To her, as to Govind, the English are an aloof and alien race and they regard the English in India as being twisted and divorced from their own people in the process of transplantation in India.

Kit, however, feels he is part of the English. Mira knowingly asserts : “His feeling for the West was no cheap flirtation, to be enjoyed so long, no longer, to be put aside thereafter and forgotten or at best remembered with a faint nostalgia. It went deeper : “it was understanding, and love.” (p. 96). No other character, not even Srinivas in *The Nowhere Man*, spending the major portion of his life in England, has this gut feeling for the English. Mira in spite of her love for Richard

cannot transcend the barriers of politics set up by the revolutionaries like Govind.

At the height of the trial of Govind for murder, she finds herself ranged with the Indians and Richard is with the English. It is a question of belief—belief in Govind's innocence against the word of an Englishman, Hickey, the missionary, in the burnt-out village. She wonders how people can be singled out, one by one, each as an individual, at a time of political turmoils in the country. The time is not ripe for a meeting of enlightened individuals like Mira and Richard. They have no option. They do not have the power or courage to change the direction of the political maelstorm.<sup>13</sup> She says forlornly : "You belong to one side—if you don't, you belong to the other. It is as simple as that ; even children understand it. And in between ? There is no in between." (p. 147). It is the inexorable nature of their parting that contributes to the tragic vision of Indian womanhood.

Mira awakes into womanhood gracefully and steps into a life fluid with possibilities. She has sufficient intelligence, courage, farsightedness and bonhomie to take up a career in journalism once she is initiated into it by Roshan. She, unlike Premala, is not a wilting wall flower and is eager for new experiences and is capable of living a full, enriched life. She is appreciative of Richard's love for her and she is also aware of the reverberations that would ensue in her family if she were to marry him. Yet she loves him precisely for the same qualities that endear her to the reader. For her there has never been anyone else nor will there ever be. We recall how she tells us about the growth in her consciousness of the feeling of love, an introspective strain that is later taken up and enlarged in *Two Virgins*. She tells us how they bridge their differences in race, colour, and religion in the conflagration of their intense mutual

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13. Markandaya, *Some Inner Fury*, p. 5. The author states in the note : "In the struggle for independence in India, non-violence was the rule. This book is based on the exception." The few incidents of active resistance in the various parts of the country went unnoticed due to a heavily censored press.

attraction. She is willing and we feel, capable enough to tackle any obstacles that may arise later in their wedded life. Yet both are curiously totally unprepared for facing the violent political storm that engulfs them.

The anguish in Mira's heart is evident enough—she is borne along with the procession that 'liberates' Govind while Richard stays on, guarding the English along with his other companions, equally English by birth and race. She sets her misery down in the concluding page :

Go ? Leave the men I loved to go with these people ? What did they mean to me, what could they mean, more than the man I loved.....I knew I would follow these people even as I knew Richard must stay. For us there was no other way, the forces that pulled us apart were too strong. (p. 192).

Mira, however, has immense resource of courage and endurance. Her love for Richard, though it does not result in wedded bliss, has enriched her greatly :

What had been given us had been gifted freely, abundantly, lit with a splendour which had coloured and enriched our whole living ; it could never be taken from us. We had known love together ; whatever happened the sweetness of that knowledge would always remain. (p. 191).

She, like Roshan, has no regrets, and does not look back. There is quiet dignity and courage in her words :

For myself, if I had to choose anew, in full knowledge of what was to come, I still would not wish my course deflected for though there was pain and sorrow and hatred, there was also love : and the experience of it was too sweet, too surpassing sweet, for me ever to want to choose differently. (p. 57).

The author's personal life, marriage to an Englishman and transferring residence from one country to another, no doubt, have been reflected in the portrayal of women facing confrontations between the East and the West. Together, Mira and Richard, would have contributed much towards mutual under-

standing and sharing of common interests and the caring and welfare of fellow human beings, had they been allowed to unite in marriage.

It can be argued that it is Roshan who is most successful, in the East and the West. Roshan, like Kit, has sympathy and understanding for the Western culture and way of living. Yet this does not exclude her love for the East. Mira speaks approvingly of her dual role in both the cultures :

Born in one world, educated in another, she entered both and moved in both with ease and nonchalance. It was a dual citizenship which few people had, which a few may have spurned, but many more envied and which she herself simply took for granted. And curiously enough both worlds were glad to welcome her in their midst. (p. 96).

This is, by and large, true of Mira too. Even stern Govind, implacable in his hatred of the British rulers, relents and tolerates the company that Roshan and Mira keep.

Roshan boycotts all British manufactured goods under the orders of the freedom fighters. She throws her chiffon and georgette sarees and the bonfire in the maiden, refrains from using cosmetics (unless of course, they be American made !) and takes to coarse homespun Gandhian attire. Mira does not meet her all the way. Loving an Englishman, being sister to a civil servant, she does not overtly practise the rituals of fighting for freedom. Yet her sympathies are clearly with her country and her countrymen. For their sake she eschews the one great love in her life.

Both are steadfast in keeping their English friends. The English may be harsh masters collectively but as individuals, they feel, are pleasing, humane and civilised. It is their honest approach to life coupled with a zest for a full participation in the events of the day that make them acceptable in both the worlds. Mira says of Roshan :

There was something in her, a flame, a vitality which drew people to her despite themselves ; and this quality,

which she possessed so lightly as hardly to be aware of it, enabled her to surmount the barriers not only of race and creed but also—perhaps even more formidable—that of politics. (p. 118).

Mira, who could easily match point for point with Roshan though she is considerably younger and starts later, finds the political disturbance, a stumbling block to her achievement of her own personal happiness with Richard. She could think of the national cause only at the expense of domestic felicity. Marital happiness and national freedom are mutually exclusive goals in her life. Roshan succeeds precisely because she rises above the narrow confines of family relationships. Mira, young, in love, finds it hard to renounce her private chance to happiness in favour of national goals of independence and caring for all Indians. If autonomy and nurturance are mutually exclusive, the woman concerned suffers. In liberating herself from the shackles of custom's tyranny and domestic injustice, the Indian woman has to pay a heavy price. It amounts to, as Betty Freidan suggests in *The Second Stage*, a question of juggling vocation, love, home, children, culture and religion.

### **Autonomy for Sarojini**

If incompatibility due to cultural disparities and East-West confrontations is a common enough reason for marital discord in the novels. *A Silence of Desire* deserves special attention as it portrays tensions in married life even in the absence of these familiar grounds for discord.<sup>14</sup> Here Sarojini and Dandekar, the wife and the husband clash on the grounds of faith and rational thinking. The couple spring from the same milieu, from the same community. They belong to the middle class, are blessed with children and are like any other couple belonging to their class and caste in the Indian community. Their life is placid enough, running on the usual lines—the husband brings a steady wage pocket home in return for which he is treated as lord and master in his own home by his wife and

14. Markandaya, *A Silence of Desire* (London : Putnam, 1960). All further references are from this edition of the novel.

children. The wife agrees with what has been stipulated, tends the children and looks after the household on a tight budget and is not miffed at the control laid on her husband but takes it as the norm.

Domestic harmony, however, is too fragile to be taken for granted for any length of time. Theirs is, in essence, a traditional marriage—it runs smoothly so long as the husband is in control. He is in control so long as the obstacles encountered are known, explained away easily and are subject to his control. But the problem arises with a sudden inexplicable growth in Sarojini's womb. Who shall exercise control over her reproductive system, herself, or Dandekar or the mystical Swami, the faithhealer is the question to be answered.

Sarojini with ingenuity and the sheer sense of self-protection that her species indulges in often, dissimulates long enough to get her bearings. She keeps her visits to the Swami a secret, knowing fully well that Dandekar, fuelled by such rationalist like Ghose in his office, would object to faith healing. Her lying about visiting the Swamy is inept; Dandekar finds out the falsehoods she utters—about meeting her cousin Rajam, about wearing her good silk sari, about buying snacks for the children—they were uttered to cover up her meeting the faith healer.

The novel revolves around the common man, Dandekar. Sarojini's state of mind filters to us through him. In this sense we get her portrait at one remove but what emerges is vivid enough to be interesting. The 'silence' of the title has been interpreted in various ways. Sarojini keeps quiet about her condition for she is afraid of being forced to go to the hospital. The Swami communicates more by his silences than by words. Margaret P. Joseph says: "His is the silence—not of desire, fear or anger, but of a powerful personality, capable of inspiring thought in others without having recourse to speech."<sup>15</sup>

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15. Margaret P. Joseph, *Kamala Markandaya* (New Delhi: Arnold—Heinemann, 1930), p. 37.



It is the silence that ensues between the husband and wife—their lack of communication—that is important. Dandekar at first suspects her of infidelity. When confronted she tells him the truth. He is shattered. Now that he has come close to losing her, he realises what she means to him, how much he has taken for granted in life, how his home wouldn't be the same without her. Hovering between a surgical operation and faith healing, he feels he cannot control his wife's desires anymore, that the Swami is an intruder in his life, that his domestic peace has been shattered irrevocably. He turns to prostitutes, his children and the house are abandoned while Sarojini sits at the feet of the Swami. The happiness generated by a quiet woman like Sarojini can be valued only in its loss.

Dandekar and Sarojini drift apart mainly because of the silence between them. He keeps quiet so that his reasoning may not dry up her faith. Yet it costs him tremendous effort to do so. He no longer feels that his wife is a part of him, she belongs to the faith healer and his supra rational beliefs. He, however, cannot relinquish her so easily : "He wanted her back. It was impossible for him to be whole, so long as any part of her was missing." (p. 170). He is willing enough to fight any lover in flesh and blood that she may have ; face to face with this intangible 'faith' he gives it ready battle too.

He emerges from the cocoon of placid domesticity. There is pain, bewilderment, introspection, fortitude in the face of misfortune, death and surrender to the inevitable. Finally he accepts with humility that his wife returns to face the operation not because of any influence on his part but because of the Swami's assurance that she will be cured if she gets operated. It is Dandekar who rises high in stature by accepting humbly the inevitable.

Sarojini like Rajam, her cousin, sticks to her faith. The Swami teaches her to relegate the body to a second place and "to turn the eye inward and find there the core of being." (p. 199). She is not surprised that Dandekar does not understand her way of thinking :

I do not expect you to understand--you with your Western notions, your superior talk of ignorance and superstition when all it means is that you don't know what lies beyond reason and you prefer not to find out. (p. 87).

The clash between the believer and the non-believer takes on the East-West colouring too. Notice how Dandekar is accused by Rajam of not believing in anything, having been trained by the British. Notice too how Ghose, the colleague in the office, having a Cambridge degree, considers the Swami 'an out-and-out imposter, manipulating people's religious mania. He also tells Dandekar that the women seeking help from the faith healer are women with womb trouble...women in fact already bordering on hysteria.' (p. 209). Yet Sarojini is anything but hysterical. Though she worries about the outcome of the operation, she is calm and asserts repeatedly that she is in God's hands. The tension inherent between conflicting modes of thought, the author herself being a product of both, is seen in Dandekar's part Western and part Eastern mind and not in Sarojini who suffers no anxieties on this score. Anchored, like Rukmani, in the Indian way of life, she believes in suffering patiently, to cleanse or spiritualize oneself. Once again we see the difference in the Eastern and Western attitudes toward human suffering.

The East-West/European-Indian motif is a predominant motif in Markandaya's fiction. In this novel, though there are no Western characters the confrontation is depicted through Western educated and oriented individuals like Ghose on the one hand and women like Sarojini and Rajam on the other side authentically Indian in their attitudes to life with Dandekar ranged in the middle. The story is one man's sojourn through fear, anger, despair cynicism and disillusionment and finally enlightenment through trials and tribulations.

### **The Silence Resistance**

Sarojini seems the usual run-of-the-mill woman of the middle class. But half way through the novel, we come to admire her tenacity in clinging to her faith in the Swami in the

face of a grave crisis in family life. One comes to realise the precious nature of family harmony and the importance of the role of the wife and the mother in promoting it. In between this harsh and unenviable task of juggling between love, work, home and children, she has to look after her physical and spiritual welfare too. The ending of the novel, though not very credible, is a happy one—the Swami advises her to get herself operated, assuring her she will get cured. What is striking is the fact that the Indian women, at least, the majority of the ordinary women like Sarojini seek consolation for their physical and material woes in the promises of spiritual guides. The emphasis on fate, on *Karma*, that God's will is inevitable, that men and women are moulded by him, that miracles can occur through faith and prayer—all these characteristic beliefs of the Indian are made explicit through Sarojini and Dandekar.<sup>16</sup> In such a context, Ghose's exhortation "make her see reason" is bound to fall on deaf ears. (p. 97). In fact Sarojini guards the 'Indianness' of her faith assiduously—the West blights this faith with pompous talk of superstition and lack of education. Her faith comes from the innermost core of her spirit and is not open to discussion, dispute and doubt. Her silence on this score alienates her further from Dandekar.

The Swami's success depends upon the faith of his patient. In a country which lacks social security, general old age pension and the normally expected amenities of living, the spiritual guide, if authentic, fulfils felt needs. When the husband shies away from the mysteries of feminine physical and consequent spiritual susceptibilities, he steps in as spiritual guide and counsellor. To the end, he is elusive and silent—before the inquiry instituted against him could proceed, he moves away from the town.<sup>17</sup>

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16. Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *Hinduism: A Religion to Live By* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1979). He shows us how all temporal activity comes within the scope and control of its polymorphous monotheism in spite of any fixed body of doctrine requiring the assent of the believer.
17. M.E. Derrett, *The Modern Indian Novel in English—A Comparative Approach* (Brussels: Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1966), pp 45-7.

The story, in the main, is the story of the average Indian husband, turning away from his conformist views and through introspection reaching newer levels of consciousness. In the process the power of religion, of faith, the hold that Swami holds over the Indian mind emerges. Sarojini is the exponent for this. Through her, the author also makes us aware of the tensions inherent in a confrontation between Eastern and Western attitudes towards religion, suffering and man-woman relationships, herself having been a witness to it all.<sup>18</sup>

Sarojini does not seem so active as Rudamani yet she cannot be dubbed as being totally submissive like Nalini or painfully sensitive like Premala. In accommodating Western ways of living and thinking and re-adjusting to traditional beliefs, she finds difficulties. She can never be akin to Roshan or Mira, a flame, a vitality. Yet she has quiet powers of resilience and indomitable faith which will enable her to survive, if not win outright, in the battle for life. Often she seems an agent in Dandekar's quest for psychological insight and spiritual awareness. Yet she is an independent enough figure to emerge and confront male reality, quietly but insistently, as wife and mother. In this sense she steals a march over other passive

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Hinduism is defined as a view of life, not a faith, with freedom of thought but restriction of action. Deccent cites belief in the transmigration of the soul, the organisation of society through the caste system and the expressed reverence for all forms of life as the cardinal tenets of this religion. The relating of religion to philosophic thought on the one hand and to a type of social organisation on the other, aimed at leading the individual through the four stages of life, through *artha*, *kama*, *dharma* and *moksha* and its effects on Indian literary expression are discussed here.

18. The ascetic in saffron robe is a recurring symbol in Indian literature and has been put to varied use by different authors. The Swami here is as enigmatic as the one in *Possession*. As a guru or leader, he is not only a spiritual force but also fulfils social needs. The mystical Swami is seen in R.K. Narayan's *The Painter of Signs*. Another ascetic, also at a fertility shrine, is however, a psychopant. This is in R.P. Jhabwala's *A New Dominion*. The Swami in *The Guide*, *He Who Rides a Tiger*, *Heat and Dust* are obviously charlatans in disguise. See Meenakshi Mukherjee, "Renunciation as an Ideal", in *The Twice-Born Fiction*, pp. 96-126.

heroines like Nalini and Premala, in the long road towards woman's autonomy. Whatever form the male control may take in her life, she would be free in those matters which are vital to the core of her being.

### Autonomy amidst the East-West Tangle

The next three novels, *Possession*, *The Coffey Dams*, and *The Nowhere Man* deal with the problems of women in a dual setting—England in India. In a sense, all most all of Markandaya's fiction dwells upon the differences in the two cultures. Here, in these three novels, the dual setting is explicit; not only the attitudes but the locales also alternate between the coloniser's country and that of the colonised.

Of these three novels, *The Coffey Dams* deals with the building of a huge dam with reservoir up in the hills of Malnad. The interactions between the British and Indian technicians and the tribals, their men-women relationships are revealing though there is no fully realised Indian woman character as such. But Helen, the wife of Clinton, the head of the British engineers, is an interesting character, precursor of the other enlightened women in Markandaya's fiction. Though British, she is in rapport with the tribals and falls in love with Bashiam, the tribal engineer. Clinton portrays the racial tensions that are the outcome of a colonial past and that blot contemporary social relationships.

The British sense of superiority, the set of complexes that inhibit, the fear and the insecurity in an alien land—these have already been spelt out in *Some Inner Fury*. The author, through characters like Jackson and Helen sympathises with "them jungle apes". Helen and Bashiam symbolise racial harmony. Though sexual relationships between the English and Indian, are a plausible solution to cross the barriers of race, the author is pragmatic enough to keep them on a temporary fooling. Like Richard and Mira, like Caroline and Valmiki, Bashiam and Helen go their separate ways. They have no future together in a world which is, as yet, unlit by an idealistic vision of the sisterhood of man such as the author envisages.

Yet the young people in the story, like Lefevre, Gopal and Helen spurn the codes of diehard imperialism and they promise the key to international fellow feeling. Markandaya, like Mackendrick in the story, is able to see both the British and the Indians balanced and objectively. Racial prejudices are not felt in a rarified atmosphere where there is a paring away of non-essentials, where one human spirit calls to another. While Helen is able to understand this, others like Clinton, Millie and Rawlings cannot, as they do not choose to step out of their blinkered, artificial slotted groove.

### **Doomed to Conquer**

*Possession*, at the surface level, relates the attempt by Lady Caroline Bell to possess physically, morally and spiritually the shepherd boy Valmiki who is also a painter of genius. From being a painter of murals on the rocky walls of the caves near his village, he is taken away and transformed into a widely acclaimed painter in the salons of London, thanks to the enterprising Caroline. The alien culture dries him up but he renews himself through his nurturing warm human relationships with Ellie the Jewish refugee and Annabel, another poor English girl. With Ellie's suicide and Annabel's forsaking him, Valmiki return to India to renew the genuine values that his guru the Swami had cultivated in him and that had been almost obliterated by the possessive, aggressive Caroline.

Caroline provides a neat counterpoint to Anasuya, the narrator who is also a writer of repute. The Indian woman is reticent, cultured, talented, helpful and spiritually enlightened. The English lady is cold, intolerant, selfish, mercenary and manipulates everything and everybody to suit herself and to attain her desired ends. She does not recognize the human element in Val, she ignores or sweeps aside the human ties he makes. She deliberately lies and makes Ellie break away from him and commit suicide. She, like colonial Britain, adopts the policy of divide and rule when it comes to Val and Annabel too.

Val realises the possessiveness of Caroline all too

he is unable to break away till the catastrophe of Ellie's death tears his magic curtain aside. He complains to Anasuya: "She does not care for me. She cares only for what I can do, and if I do it well, it is like one more diamond she can put on the necklace round her throat for her friends to admire." (p. 55). What she is capable of is "a forcible possessing which had established nothing so clearly as that there could be no reasonable relationship—merely a straddling of one stranger by another with little out of it for either." (p. 70). Anasuya also assesses her possessiveness: "Caroline thinks Valmiki belongs to her and in a way she's right. She wouldn't let go. People don't easily give up what they think are their possessions. The English never have." (p. 198).

Anasuya and Caroline maintain a love hate relationship "like the kind Britain and India used to have." Obviously the intention of the author is to parody the English-Indian relationship. Caroline is queenly England lording it over her colony India and Val is poor India, underdeveloped and unschooled but spiritually intact. Like India he takes to shallow Western values only to be hurt deeply by them and returns to the Swamy's ancient and timeless wisdom. This comparison between the two countries, between two ways of living is made self-evident at every step. The critic Robert Payne complains that "England keeps getting in the way."<sup>19</sup>

Markandaya does not rest with the comforting thought that *Karma* has to be endured. She is aware of the differences between the two cultures and while she is critical of the deficiencies at home, she is equally trenchant against the Western urge to dominate, to possess. There is no happy solution in sight. Caroline tell the Swami, unabashedly confident of her own power: "One day he (Val) will want to be mine again. I shall take care to make him want me again and on that day I shall come back to claim him." (p. 232). The Swamy's serenity, detachment and faith in humanity seem to waver for "his eyes were troubled." Perhaps he foresees a

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19. Robert Payne, "The Homesick Shepherd", *Saturday Review* (23 May 1963), p. 34.

future fall from grace on the part of Val, egged on by Caroline, who, as Anasuya says, "came of a breed that never admitted defeat." Like Mira, here, Anasuya is poised between the two worlds and is aware of the human predicament, caught between the two.

Anasuya is capable of a decent respectable existence as a woman of means, and as a writer of moderate success. She is of the same ilk as Mira and Roshan, who prove that a decent existence is possible without a man, that a manless lifestyle need not necessarily be dry, meaningless, that one can be completely independent and yet care for and nurture humanity. It is not as if these women are unable to marry; it is rather that they do not seem to see any point in marrying. They have evolved a long way from the likes of Nalini and Rukmani and here is *Possession*, the mother of Valmiki—the latter married to a poor peasant, dies a slow death due to consumption when she is hardly thirty.

The mother, yoked to a weakling, has enough love in her to nurture even her wayward son. She buys gold sovereigns for him and asks Anasuya to hide them in the Swamy's cave until his return. Unlike Ellie who dies so gaunt and troubled and locked in tragedy, this mother dies serene. Hers, as Anasuya writes, "is a surrender to forces that were not so much vindictive as inevitable." (p. 175). With her death Valmiki's home "was now finally and demonstrably closed." (p. 176).

Caroline showing her fangs and clawing Val and Annabel apart, exercises power over the other characters. She draw and pulls the strings like a puppet master. Yet her power over them stems from their allowing her to have it. Despite their power, Caroline is by no means happy or fulfilled. She is like those rich women who flock to the Swamy in the Indian city, so aptly described by Anasuya :

...all with a less evident common factor of subtle deformity—the pinched, down drawn mouths of permanent discontent, the out-thrust bosom and shoulders of an unrelenting aggressiveness, the painted, shadowed wary



eyes of people exhausted by their evolutionary move from being women, happy to surrender, to women, doomed to conquer, like those distant sea creatures that look their first steps on to land to collapse gasping upon the beach." (p. 99).

If this is to be the evolutionary direction of woman, there is little chance of fulfilment, personal or social.

### **Autonomy for Vasantha**

The East-West confrontation is made use of by Caroline to possess Val solely. She is quick to manipulate racial prejudice to suit her ends. *The Nowhere Man* takes up this theme further. The author, aware of the cruelties perpetrated in the name of imperialism, condemns the British domination and the misery it entailed. Srinivas and his wife Vasantha are forced to take up residence in England because their families were suspected of involvement with terrorist activities against British rule in India. Their two sons are born in England, brought up there, the elder marries an English girl, the younger dies fighting for England, hit by a German bomb. Vasantha, grown old in England, dies of consumption and the lonely, alienated Srinivas is brought back to the mainstream of life through the caring he receives from Mrs. Pickering, an equally old and destitute but English lady.

In spite of half a century of living in England, Srinivas is the victim of racial prejudice. The novel shows us the reaction of the Britishers to the inflow of coloured immigrants. Woven with this East-West confrontation is the adjustments required of Vasantha and of Srinivas in bringing up children on alien soil, in maintaining their traditional roots, in bridging the generation gaps, in accommodating sociological changes and in preserving their faith in man. Their lives have all the elements of a true tragedy. In a world where values have run amuck, where beastly young men like Fred Fletcher flaunt their cruelty and surrealistic violence, where the mindlessness of terrorism is the order of the day, it is difficult to keep sane, let alone care for one's fellow human beings. Markandaya

focusses deliberately on the darker side of life in England as a part of her crusade for the betterment of race relations.

Vasantha, the wife of Srinivas, is a quiet little woman who reminds us of Ambika in R. K. Narayan's *The Vendor of Sweets*. She maintains her 'Indianness', her integrity in the face of alien rule while in India, and racial prejudice while in England. Death does not diminish or efface her. She is a living presence to Srinivas in the old house. Quietly she had filled Srinivas's entire being. Witness his feeling empty on death, a vacuum that is never to be filled again, however, much Mrs. Pickering may have cared for him :

Empty. Without meaning. Scooped out, picked clean, no climbing up the slippery sides. A skull, from which all matter had gone. Sea urchin shall, from which the living lights had been brutally plucked, leaving the pearly skeleton to serve as an ornament for the mindless, the surf riders of life. (p. 40).

Vasantha had been engaged to marry him, right from childhood days—the usual Brahmin practice. Srinivas tells us : "He could not have said how he knew she was to be his bride, but he did. When he first realised he was not quite eleven ; at that age the knowledge lay simply within him." As for Vasantha, younger as she was, she was also aware of the pact between the two neighbouring families : "Vasantha also knew. It did not inhibit her. After all, she was only seven." (p. 104) While at play she calmly calls him husband while he objects shyness. She has, as the author states, "a devastating kind of realism" that stands her in good stead in the years to come.

Alliances between known families with similar status and interests in life do not call for special adjustments on the part of the young couple. Yet the times being troubled, the families concerned are subject to harrasment by the British rulers. Vasantha's brother, Vasudeo, an ardent terrorist, brings the wrath and suspicion of the brutal alien police force upon the household. In the course of searching through the house for evidence of terrorist activities, the English superintendent loses control ; swaggering, to hide his uncertainty he inserts his cane under the frill of Vasantha's skirt :

What it did to him, this physical act, astonished and alarmed him. He would have withdrawn if he could, but now control had slipped away entirely. The supple cane flicked upward and the flounces gathered soberly around Vasantha's ankles flew up over her head and left her naked, ready for bed as she had been, of her own though, which was an entirely different kind. There was a burst of laughter from the men who ringed the room. (p. 137).

The Englishman feels his control has been worn down "by the totality of plastic resistance and concealed warrens of retreat and resilience. The house and these people and the girl whose skin he despised; though not the secret dark scented flesh he had glimpsed, which had been his undoing." Srinivas, in fury, knocks him down and the two are separated by the people around. Afterwards the brother, Vasudeo is found hidden and dead in the family camphor-wood chest. Vasantha's father in prison, Vasantha and her mother in the hospital, the family has to be succoured by Srinivas and his parents. They gather together, even though in a state of shock, clean up the debris left by Vasudeo and welcome Vasantha back after a month's stay in the hospital.

She comes back, thinner, quieter, not the swooning girl expected by the aunts, but clear eyed, dry-eyed, calm voiced. The family is unaware of what she has now turned into since she is beyond their actual experience and imaginative grasp. "Father imprisoned, brother gone, the shameful thing that had been done to her... had she no feeling? It gripped them that she should not show any." But Vasantha's mother comes in to ward off the curiosity seekers. "She had seen Vasantha, dry mouthed, sleepless, staring up hour after hour at the stark ceiling of the hospital ward. She felt enough had been gone through without the need to mount an appropriate show." (p. 141).

### **The Physical Fact of the Matter**

Vasantha emerges from this ordeal scarred but toughened enough.



number of issues, she cannot compromise on this vital issue. She had been raped, according to her, in spirit and the body is of little account. Like any Hindu wife she feels chastity amounts to chastity in mind and not the mere body. We recall Ryo Kyo's Savitri in *The Serpent and the Rope*. Adultery in the Western sense of the term is limited and not perceived as such in the Indian context. When Vasamha counsels Srinivas with "that is the physical fact of the matter", (p. 150) she is referring to this Indian concept of chastity. Schooled as she is in the Indian way, she would never feel whole or pure again.

It is this same uncompromising Hindu code of conduct that she brings to bear in the remaining years of her life in England. She deliberately keeps her standard of living modest. Srinivas, in deference to her wishes does not expand his spice trade. His wife tells him: "If we live rich, like it or not, it is at someone else's expense." (p. 15). It is the Gandhian idea of eschewing luxury while the majority live in poverty. While she is willing to share in the warmth of human commitment even on alien soil, she is unwilling to change the essential Indianness of her way of living, even in the external aspects. Her attitude towards marriage and motherhood are essentially Indian, brought into sharp contrast when Laxman, the elder son marries an English girl. Laxman and Pat constitute a household in which she has no part, because of her Indianness. According to him she sticks out like a sore thumb—but his disapproval could not force her to change her identity. She clings to her sari and slippers with her hair in a bun and a cardigan for the winter. "She would, she felt, merely look ridiculous if she painted her face and put on a skirt and stockings and only a widow, which thankfully she wasn't would lop her hair." (p. 31).

She is, however, a practical woman and acquiesces the British way of living in aspects which seem to be ad antagous and discards some Indian concepts which tend to be messy or impractical. This she does with finesse but this adopting of the foreign way is done on a limited scale: "not wholesale, however, nor without propitiation, and some hauling in of God's name," (p. 19). In essentials, she is wholly Indian:

her adjustment to England is but superficial. Her religion she sticks to, regarding Christianity to be positively narrow, parochial, riddled with miracles and childish deeds, a religion she declares "excellent for ten-years-olds." She yields on some outward trappings, but her thinking remains intact and Indian :

Vasantha was a Hindu, born and bred in a subtle religion whose concepts, being on the cosmic scale, made no concessions to puny mankind ; a religion that postulated one God, infinite, resplendent, with a thousand different aspects but one : God the Creator, preserver, destroyer union with whom was the supreme purpose and bliss. (pp. 17-18).

It is her religion which sustains her, when, with Laxman gone out of the orbit of her life, the younger son Seshu whose sensibilities were akin to hers, dies during the war. She feels they ought to return to India now that it is free of foreign rule but illness cuts short her desire. Just past forty, she is stricken, and her death is hastened because, with Seshu's death she gives up her will to live.

She prepares for death stoically. She puts her affairs in order, with a detachment, aware that the worldly concerns are insignificant after all. Her faith offers her truth and however, painful it is, she accepts it :

For there were no readymade comforts to hand. Their faith offered no anodynes, no cheery resurrections and ascensions and meetings up with cherished ones in heaven ; only a formidable purification through rebirth, and the final ineffable bliss of divine union. (p. 38).

### **'I cared for him'**

As a young woman, her future fixed with Srinivas, Vasantha does not have many options before her. She makes the best of the bargain and in the process, is closer to her husband, perhaps because, living in a foreign country, they are thrown upon each other's inner resources of courage and endurance more frequently than would be the case back in India. She has the foresight to buy a house and prepare for the future—

it proves to be a refuge for Srinivas later on, stricken with old age and leprosy, haunted by racial prejudice and diminishing income. At the same time, she is not mercenary like Laxman. She sticks to her habitual simple way of living and dies as she lived, an average middle class Indian wife and mother. When she whispers, just before passing away, "It has been a happy marriage", one understands the term 'happiness' not in a literal, flat, tonal sense of the word but in the broader sense of meeting life's challenges on one's own terms, at one's own pace, in harmony with one's partner in life. Srinivas, though he rebels at her passing away, reconciles himself to the inevitable and performs the rites she had asked for—the scattering of her ashes in running water and the sprinkling of earth from India and Ganges water on to them.

The emptiness and the mindless aridity, both physical and spiritual that pervades other married couples like the Radcliffes and Laxman and Pat can be contrasted with the promise of fulfilment in Vasanthi's life with Srinivas; despite the fact that she fails to integrate with English life and remained wholly Indian to her dying day, she gives *mornings* for support and sustenance to her husband. With Pat, Laxman leads a mindless existence that is neither Indian nor English and poor Dr. Radcliffe is drained of all purpose, esteem and will to live by the carping criticism and materialistic craving of his silly wife, Marjorie. Vasanthi does not pretend to be anything other than what she is, and goes uncompromised to the day of her death, "irredeemably Indian in style and cut." (p. 232). Srinivas has a regret in confining her ashes not to the currents of an Indian river but to the alien river Thames.

So pervasive her influences has been in his life that after her demise Srinivas feels he is a nowhere man in a nowhere place with nothing to do. He has to be rescued from this bleakness by human warmth, by human commitment and the agent happens to be Mrs. Pickering. The tragic vision of the author focusses on the waste of human goodness in the face of sheer blind racial hatred as epitomised by Fred and his cronies. Though Fred is engulfed in the holocaust he creates, it is a sad commentary on the society that lets brother kill brother on

flimsy grounds of race, creed, and nationality. Mrs. Pickering symbolises the author's hope that racial barriers can be transcended at all levels and ages.

Just as Vasantha had cared, so also does Mrs. Pickering. The woman by her caring, by her nurturing people in need, paves the way for the sisterhood of man. Skin colour and religion do not enter the picture. 'A searing light' seems to flow from Mrs. Pickering when Srinivas dies. She says simply : "I cared for him." (p. 299). This seems to the core of what Markandaya has been trying to convey through her fiction.

Mere sexual relations do not bring harmony or inner peace to her characters, Eastern and Western. As in the case of Richard and Mira, and here Srinivas and Mrs. Pickering, it is not a case of sexual attraction alone that pulls them together. They come together, guided and nurtured by each other, the role of guide and follower frequently being reversed. In *The Nowhere Man* is evident a maturer and surer type of human relationship than in the earlier novel. The author puts it clearly :

They had come together and in the process had salved and restored each other. But it was a muted process, more an easing of aches than a violent build up of pleasure, which did not demand the constant stimulus of touch and presence of young love. Even when they lay together it was with a degree of serenity : looking on, as it were, on something which had once been wet and wild, but now was calm. (p. 70).

This serenity, this calmness that is aspired for by the women in the novels, proves to be an elusive goal.

With the examples that people like Richard and Roshan in *Some Inner Fury*, Mrs. Pickering in *The Nowhere Man* and later Sir Arthur Copeland in *The Golden Honeycomb* set before us of enlightened nurturance of a fellow human being, it is difficult to harp on the clash between Eastern and Western values. The basic premises of the two value systems seem often to be identical ; at any rate, it is certain we oversimplify the simultaneous cultural diversity and unity of the human race if we pit the one



against the other and ultimately terms like Eastern and Western seem to be highly subjective; differently interpreted by different authors.<sup>20</sup> In order to preserve a workable hypothesis in the context of the Indian-English novel, we speak of Western values as referring to the modern, post-Renaissance, era with its emphasis on science, technology and secular living. What is emphasised is the Western concern about the individual, his sexual love and personal happiness whereas in the East, emphasis is given more to a man's (or woman's) place in a hierarchy rather than his individual worth. The Indian writer in English operates under the different Indian context which eschews the dogged pursuit of happiness, and material success.

Love is expected to follow marriage and not to precede it, in India. Here terms like love, success, happiness and individuality, raise a number of questions and are points to ponder about. Man-woman relationships are hedged in more by pressure from the family and are more suggestive of capitulation due to societal influence than of choice arising from freedom of action. Though the distinction between the two value systems is dependent on the writer's conception of what is Indian and European. Though there is a constant intermingling and diffusion of both the systems, we have to bear in mind that differences disappear when writers affirm their faith in humanity. Markandaya transcends geo-political and cultural barriers when she speaks of 'the literature of concern' and of the universal sisterhood/brotherhood of man.<sup>21</sup>

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20. [Mecnakshi Mukherjee, "East West Encounter" in *The Twice-Born Fiction*, p. 72. While attempting to demarcate between the two systems of values, she concedes the difficulties involved in such a division: Apart from the fact that after two centuries of proximity it has become increasingly difficult to demarcate precisely between the two traditions as available in India, such patent oppositions tend to prove disastrous in fiction in so far as they oversimplify action and conflict. Nevertheless, in spite of the constant overlapping and interchangeability of values, some kind of basic difference does exist between the two civilizations."

21. E.M. Forster, in *A Passage to India*, depicts with sympathy and discernment, the complicated Indian reaction, both Hindu and Muslim, to British rule. Though published in 1924, the book has become a minor classic, its scrutiny of human nature and its plea for human contact and personal relationships unaffected by political conditions as

## Autonomy for the Sisters

In *Two Virgins*, the story about two growing sisters in a closely knit impoverished family in a small village, we learn a great deal about what the fabric of life means to the Indian woman through adolescence into adulthood. The author portrays the questing outward of the two sisters; their lives are shaped by the influences of their childhood environment. They move beyond the home and the village. They do not want to be roofed in by the familiar environment, by the familiar emotions. They strive out towards the city, the larger life beyond the unknown, and they want to feel free. In imposing upon them their growing awareness of their own sensibilities, the author shows us how they, though sisters under the same paternal roof, develop differently. Saroja and Lalitha, the two sisters are constantly made to choose between the Eastern and the Western way of perceiving the world around. The contrasts between tradition and modernity between India during and after British rule, between the older and younger members of the family, between the sons and the daughters are all there around the two, in their school, at home, and in their upbringing in general.

Their own ripening sexuality of which they are both keenly aware leads them in differing directions. Lalitha, the elder, opts for manipulation through sex while Saroja having a foretaste of sexual knowledge and its power, observes everything, wisely decides to wait and bide her time. Lalitha, the more

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### 21 (Contd.)

valid as ever. The conflict of temperament and tradition involved in the Indo-British relationship revealed by him is echoed in a number of writers since then, as in Markandaya—dealing with the East-West encounter.

B. Rajan, "Identity and Nationality", in *Commonwealth Literature*, ed. John Press (London, 1965), p. 108. He deems it an advantage to have two cultural systems in operation: "The presence of two cultures in one's mind forms a wider and therefore, saner basis on which to originate the quest for identity.... The discordance between these two cultures can be creative as well as merely confusing. Perhaps one can go further and suggest that the man with mixed allegiances is contemporary Everyman."

beautiful one, plays on the vulnerability of her doting father, and gets away with what she wants. Yet the author shows us that physical beauty and feminine desirability, the cardinal points in Lalitha's existence, the goals touted as part and parcel of traditional Indian womanhood, need not lead to personal fulfilment. Lalitha strikes out beyond the pale of conventional society and is brought low. Betrayed by her own beauty, she goes to the city in pursuit of a film career, lured by the 'western punk', Mr. Gupta. She sells herself to this film magnate in order to become an actress—in the process, she has to abort her illegitimate child. As Saroja tells it, she has "more than her fair share of men" and becomes a woman of the streets.

Saroja is a witness to what Lalitha undergoes. Gupta refuses to undertake any responsibility for Lalitha, blaming it all on her femininity: "Lalitha is a woman with the natural desires of a woman, he said." (p. 220). It is left to Amma, the mother, to lament, and guarding Lalitha's pregnancy from the prying eyes of neighbours in the village, they decide to abort the baby in the city. The repercussions it has on the two sisters are predictable. Lalitha, who had attempted suicide and was rescued by Saroja, at the brink of the well, who had cried and let the tears flow, "an endless stream from the wells of her sorrowing womanhood," finds the whole episode horrible and it dries her up emotionally.

There is no way she could keep an illegitimate child. The mother in her mourns the loss. "It isn't fair", she said. You'd think there was some other way, wouldn't you? To keep a child if you wanted to, whether you were married or not? But there isn't, no way at all.

If there had been—said Saroja.

Too late, said Lalitha. She smiled and she glittered, there was the sharpness of daggers about her. The thing to remember, my sweet, is never to cry over spilt milk.

I'm not, said Saroja. Her eyes were brimming.

Over men or babies, said Lalitha. I'm telling you now because I shan't be able to tell you later. (p. 233).

Saroja is grief struck for the baby that had been done away with. As a young warm hearted village girl; she has witnessed birth often enough—amidst the milch cows and had even assisted the wife of Manikkam, the milkman in her labour. But the destruction of an unborn child is a shattering blow to the warm nurturant side of her nature. Her mother tells her : "It is the same the world over", she said with pity, "There is no room for the children of sin... The sin is not to make room for them", she said bluntly. "The sin is to conceive", said Amma... "Your sister wandered too far", she said wearily, "she was lured outside the code of our community and is paying the penalty, that is all." (p. 234). Motherhood is not the marvel it is supposed to be without the mantle of marriage and Saroja learns this through Lalitha. She tells us : "The improper thing was to fling yourself at a man and she knew what came of that. Lalitha was living evidence." (p. 221)

### **The World is My Oyster**

Lalitha, very early in life is aware of her beauty and its hold over people around her. Her beauty earns her a lot of perquisites at home, denied to her ordinary—looking plain, little sister, Saroja. She knows instinctively when to bat her long lustrous eyelashes and how to weave her father and mother and at times even crusty cynical aunt Alamelu around her little finger. Feminine desirability and sexual parlance dominate her mode of behaviour every single moment of her life. Her beauty and her manipulation of it earns her a host of admirers and thereby she gains in status as Saroja puts it :

Lalitha had status. She had no husband yet, but everyone could see when she did, she would have more than her fair proportion. There was no lack of emmisaries. The young men's mothers sent them and the women came and spoke to Amma and pinched Lalitha's cheek and Lalitha was demure, pressed her delicate feet together and cast down her eyes to show off her lashes which were long and lustrous. Saroja knew it was for show because Lalitha told her. (p. 13).

Lalitha goes to the exclusive school run by Mrs. Mendoza and learns to dance around the maypole and to talk mincingly about culture, religion and society. The Christian environment at school adds strength to the individualistic strain in her. Aunt Alamelu has cause enough to accuse her and her parents about the way she has been brought up :

Maypoles, dancing around them and such practices, is it a fitting pastime for our young Hindu maidens? And simpering with young men and flaunting themselves in films and such like, is there any propriety in it; no, it is shame-shame, totally contrary to the code of our youth for a thousand years.. It is ended at our peril, Brother, she said, it is not for us, puny denizens of this immoral age, to question the wisdom of our ancient mentors... You have given your children rights, Brother, she said, and they have come home to roost." (pp. 177-76).

So much for modernity, Westernised education and equal rights for women.

In her balanced examination of human nature, the author does not ascribe Lalitha's going astray solely to these newer influences. Her heredity, and her family environment also contribute to her fall from grace. Amma, the mother of the two girls, is herself a complex character, not lily white and pure as Sita or Savithri. She is soft, fully feminine and free with her looks and passionate by nature. She is similar to the sensuous Indian woman of Vatsyayana's *Kama Sutra*, the well-known directory of desire. According to her, as to Appa who is weak and malleable, where his wife is concerned, sex is something natural in human nature though "the world ticks like a cracked machine, comes up with a dirty wash whatever you put in it, it turns what is natural and magical into something sordid." (p. 178).<sup>22</sup>

22. M.R. Anand and Lande Dane, *Kama Sutra* (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1981). In this latest edition of the classic, he calls sex not obscene but holy. See A. Nath, rev. of *Kama Sutra*, ed. M.R. Anand, *India Today*, 15 December 1981, p. 137. While he opposes permissiveness, Anand points out how the ancient Indian sexual mores evolved a confrontation between the sexes that was open but tender

Early in the novel, Lalitha tells us accurately enough : It is her coming out in me she doesn't like..." (p. 21). While Saroja is worriedly picking away at the edges of this mystery, we understand why as a mother she is afraid of Lalitha taking after her passionate nature. Like the tigress she wants to protect her cubs and sexual passion, she well understands, is an easy road to misery and social disgrace ; she knows the thin ice one skates on if one gives free rein to what Bhattacharya calls "the primeval urge of a woman to be nothing but a woman."<sup>23</sup>

Amma, conscious of her femininity, bold with her eyes at men (we remember the Sikh trader and Aunt Alamelu's tirade against his visit) is certainly no Sita. Saroja the younger, perceptive girl, admits this candidly :

Sita was purity itself, she was devoted to Rama, her husband and god and would not have lifted her eyes to another. Amma was free with her looks, she stroked and caressed her own flesh, you could spot the seeds which had sprouted in Lalitha, her ways with her eyes and limbs ; though Lalitha had added finesse of her own ; but if Appa had taken to the wilderness, Amma would have followed him without a second thought. They bickered, shouted, were cold with each other more often than they were melting and tender, but Saroja knew Amma would have been bereft without Appa and worse the other way around. (p. 202).

Amma, for all her passion and fire is firmly anchored to the ground through her marriage. She is devoted to her husband in her own way and theirs is an enduring bond that makes them close ranks in the face of the common enemy. But Lalitha has no such relationship with Mr. Gupta, the film producer. Though Hindu, he is outside the pale of her com-

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22 (Contd.)

and free : "In Kajuraho they (the lovers) look at each other without awkwardness. Grace had entered the embrace. Now, from the babuisation of the middle classes, Victorianism spread." N.C. Chaudry also deplores the same corrupting influence of Anglicised prudery in *To Live or Not To Live*.

23. Bhabani Bhattacharya, *Shadow from Ladakh* (New Delhi : Hind, 1957) pp. 273-74.

munity and is not bound by the conventions that hedge her as a woman, as a girl in her family. In her choice of her lover, she acts unwisely. She risks all and is brought low unlike her sister who observes acutely, quivers with new experiences but chooses to wait her time out wisely. She knows that a liaison with Gupta or Devraj would lead to no respectable intentions tied up with marriage. She knows the dreadful mess that pregnancy unsanctified by marriage would lead to. Amma's guardianship bolstered by the age-old wisdom of Aunt Alamelu enable Saroja to stand on her guard against masculine wiles and feminine faultlines.

Lalitha is betrayed by her faith in her beauty, in feminine desirability and sexual power. She is no match in the game of sexual politics against a city-hardened, money-encrusted wily entrepreneurs like Gupta. Having pinned her chances of success on her desirability by men as a woman, she has no alternative to fall back on, on being betrayed by Gupta, except to turn to the streets. Her own instinctive urges as a woman, her biological faultlines too make her susceptible. She speaks of love as ecstasy and she recalls Gupta as 'so kind and skilled with a glow on her, in her voice as if underneath her skin, tapers were burning...' (p. 163). Gupta too tells us that she is a natural with the natural desires, of a woman.

Saroja rightly suspects Lalitha of yielding to a woman's instinctive weakness: "She wondered if this was what Lalitha had felt like, it was the cause of her opening herself to him, allowing him to put the seed of the baby inside her. It was the only explanation for a girl to be so careless." (p. 218). This is also frightening to the younger one for it brings home to her the vulnerability of the female sex: "What rooted itself was the suspicion that it wasn't necessary to be cast in Lalitha's mold or any mold, the urge was implanted deep and indestructively in every human being." (p. 218). While one sympathises with the predicament of the man, for he too is not made of stone, as Gupta states, the woman suffers more. She has no escape routes in a tightly organised, tradition bound society. She cannot hide herself anywhere, she has no coffee shop to go to like her brothers, she cannot drown her sorrows in drinks

like the menfolk, she cannot take to opium like Manikkam and she cannot philosophise like her father. Saroja puts it clearly : "Women had no beltholes. There was no escape for them, they had to stand where they were and take it." (p. 123).

Being a woman is the problem. All the rules and restrictions against which little girls chafed and women grumbled about were designed only to block all routes to escape from the conventional mode of living, from "society, that beastly tamer" in Saroja's words. Lalitha has to confront society ; her transgression makes the confrontation harder. The rules at home and in society had been designed to protect her and prevent her becoming pregnant without the mantle of marriage. Though endowed with beauty and intelligence, though loved and nurtured by enlightened parents, it didn't work—Lalitha succumbs to temptation all too easily and has to pay the price for it. As Aunt Alamelu says decisively, "It's her life, she chose it" ; once having erred, there is no going back. The girl who felt that the world is her oyster the girl who had a life so fluid with possibilities ahead of her, is now drained of all happiness, of any sense of fulfilment. Like Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina, Lalitha too, is endowed with natural beauty and vivacity, only to be laid low all too cruelly. Life seems to be a terrible waste of human potential. It is especially ironic since Lalitha had demanded so much from life and ends up with nothing : "Lalitha who demanded beauty and perfection out of life, who was herself so exquisitely fashioned. But it gave you no claims, none at all, no guarantees whatsoever." (p. 230).

### Virgin in a Whorehouse

*Two Virgins* is a novel about growing up, about adolescence awakening into womanhood. We are accustomed to seeing men like Ravi in *A Handful of Rice* Rabi in *The Golden Honeycomb* indulging in endless kafkaesque speculations.<sup>24</sup> Here the story unfolds through Saroja's eyes and point of view. The story, like *The Turn of the Screw* is also a tale of innocence and corruption. Through Saroja's innocence and outward questing

24. Though surprisingly Margaret Joseph accords a poor estimate of *Two Virgins* in her study of the author.



for autonomy and adventure in life, the author gives expression to one of the modern problems—the plight of sensitive human beings caught in a harsh dehumanising society. Saroja also symbolises the conflict between reason and feeling, between tradition and modernity. Her freely discriminating responses are ever in contrast with the restricting egotism of the people around her.

She does not want to be hedged in by the time worn values and way of living dinned into her by her elders. She wants to move beyond them and seek newer fresher pastures and establish a sense of her own integrity, of her own independence as a whole human being. The discovering wondering intelligence, male or female, is a vital and attractive part of fictional design. In the process, Saroja's relationship with her family and friends turn out to be awkward and painful enough. But the dynamism of projected wonder—growing up, meeting each new day's demands on her own terms, getting visual evidence and experience through a sibling's travails, the slow but inevitable awakening of new sensibilities and the inexorable growth and demands of a developing sexuality, all these propel her on her way. A new kind of perception, a new order of adjustments is necessary at the end of the story when her childhood ends. In the meantime, the author portrays skilfully the young girl's impressions, the details about the simultaneous awakening of intelligence and coquettishness, confidences, confessions of being led astray, of falling in love, the disclosure and analysis of delicate and shy refinements in feeling—in short, all the unknown and subtle aspects of femininity at the depths of a young woman, which husbands and lovers, fathers and brothers generally ignore or are unaware of. What we have is a full participation in the growing consciousness of Saroja.

In the narrow compass of one short novel, we witness the development of the Indian woman from phantasmagoric infancy to almost discretionary adulthood. A slip of a girl she may be but she protects herself by assuming silence, stupidity and often agility. The awareness of her own integrity is brought through the negative depravity of promiscuous love as seen in Lalitha. She creates a positive world from the sympathy

and loyalties of ordinary human relationships, from her awareness of the quality of lasting love and respect. It is this awareness that helps her from being sexually mutilated or spoiled. She develops her own sense of integrity in spite of and sometimes with aid of the sexually depraved environment. She succeeds because, unlike Lalitha, there is enough felt life in her consciousness to sustain her awareness of what is wrong, of what is to be done or not. It is this awareness, the foretaste of knowledge, that makes her stand steadfast despite masculine allure, in the form of Devraj or Chingleput. She is not to be corrupted, truly a virgin in a whorehouse.

There is the interesting episode where surrounded by a nexus of adult infidelities, Devraj, the assistant of Mr. Gupta, attempts to make a pass at her :

He came close. He touched her. Please, he said, Saroja leapt up. Her flesh was molten. She knew what he was asking. She knew where it ended. She had dragged her bloated gravid sister out of the bog, she had seen the bloody pulp of the baby. Take your hands off me, she cried, and Aunt Alamelu, of all people loomed up and put words she was fighting for into her mouth. What do you take me for, she screamed, a virgin in your whorehouse ? (p. 245).

Saroja has had a foretaste of sexual knowledge through Lalitha. Growing up amidst so much beauty and squalor, she is untouched by the squalor. She knows 'the facts of life' ; she knows sibling rivalry. She is aware she is no match for Lalitha, that she can never occupy the special Lalitha shaped niche in her father's heart. Yet she loves her parents and her sister, and is generous enough to feel sorry even for Gupta, her sister's seducer. Her love of life reflects not only in her caring for the farm animals but also in nurturing the poor wife of Manikkam, the milkman, in childbirth repeatedly. She tells us, she knows about blood and birth and what married life involves. She watches people keenly and is aware of how her parents' quarrels 'end in the same old way', of how Lalitha feels towards Gupta, of how her own flesh craves for the seductive Devraj : "There was nothing she wanted more."

The sleeve of the Madras check shirt brushed against her cheek, seducing, the bait in the trap cunningly, sweetly concealed." (p. 241).

Similarly, at the end of the novel, Chingleput, the sweet-seller who has been her guide and confidante, suddenly changes track and clasps her with the glib explanation that he is a man and he cannot help it. Saroja, young as she is, has enough of her mother's common sense to reject resolutely both Devraj and Chingleput: "She wasn't afraid. She knew too much, she had gone through too much to be afraid of anything. But she knew she wasn't for him, she would never be. So she drew away from him." (p. 250). She is the pragmatic one in the story; she keeps her bolthole open to fly to and Devraj with his city allure and Chingleput with his comforting fatherly airs cannot lure her into the sexual trap.

Implied in the story are the contrasts between the city and the village, between tradition and modernity, between idealism and common sense. Lalitha symbolises the fondness of the village girl for city life. She is trapped by Gupta partly because of his masculine allure and partly because of his 'city varnish'. She emphasises physical beauty and feminine desirability; she flirts, and is vain, shallow and selfish. She abandons conventional morality and follows her own star in the city. Her future is left vague. Perhaps deluded by visions of making a success as a film star she is only to sink into the morass of prostitution into which unwittingly, village girls usually fall. Perhaps in the clash between opposing systems of values, Lalitha could have attained tragic dimensions. But the author does not focus on her—it is Saroja who is the centrepiece and secondly the author is not concerned with the morality or the rightness of the issue.

We are not invited to pass a judgment on the two sisters. Each acts in her own way and what is important is not the violation of conventional morality but that of social codes and the consequences. That Lalitha has erred in breaking the strict social code for young girls is regretted; not the fact of her conception. Once again it is society, that beastly ramer, that gives no room for children outside the wedlock and hence

Lalitha has to be aborted. In Aunt Alamelu, we find the familiar poor relation in the Indian joint family. As the interfering relative, she not only provides humour, she stands for 'society', tradition and the norm of social behaviour. Saroja is discerning enough to notice the power of social strictures. She is rooted firmly on the earth and has warmth of heart side by side with an awareness of reality. She knows what she wants in life, early enough :

She wanted lots of lovely cuddly babies, and, as Appa said, the way society was organised you had to be married for that. A peasant's ambition, Lalitha called it, but Saroja did not feel herself demeaned by that, there were lots of qualities of peasants that she greatly admired. (pp. 57-58).

Saroja has come of age. Her knowledge of the world has not diminished her nurturant side. She is, however, realistic enough not to add on her burdens as a woman ; she wisely chooses to stay within the prescribed code. It is a new kind of perception that she attains. A great deal could be done for nurturing humanity within the existing boundaries of social norms and conventions. One need not always be a rebel to serve mankind.

### **Autonomy amidst the Princely Landscape**

There is not much of action amidst the avid princely landscape during the days of British rule in *The Golden Honeycomb*. Rabi, named after the poet, is the main protagonist here. On his shoulders falls the responsibility of preserving his kingdom, like a fragile honeycomb, from the British usurpers and the Indian freedom fighters. He has to maintain a delicate balance to maintain his inheritance and at the same time keep his conscience alive. The women in his life, his grandmother the Dowager Rani Manjula, his mother Mohini, the 'constant concubine', Usha, the Dewan's daughter, Sophie, the Resident's daughter and Jaya and Janaki of the labourer's class serve as instruments of awakening his conscience. Through them, he emerges as an enlightened heir apparent, vastly different from the 'brown Englishmen' the conforming rulers that his pre-

human plan. She inculcates in her grandson a love for family-life, the country, and life itself.

She faces life simply, bravely, without any fuss, on her way up as a girl in a remote valley to the kingdom of Devapur and consortship. She dies as simply, as desired by her, with 'no-fuss': "So without fuss, he (Rabi) lit the pyre, performing a duty which had skipped a generation to devolve on him." (p. 376).

### **The Queen and the Concubine**

Rabi's mother, Mohini, is contrasted at every step with Shanta Devi, the queen of Devapur, the legal wife of Bawajiraj III. Mohini is wilful, wayward and thumbs her nose at the British and the Brahmin with equal aplomb. She preserves her autonomy by refusing to marry her lover and thereby causes tensions all around. She is far sighted enough to perceive the disadvantages that this promiscuous union of hers with the king might bring their love—child, Rabi. But she is clearly adamant about not compromising her autonomy, her sense of integrity, for the sake of legal, royal favours. She has a living witness of what princely thralldom could do to a woman—Shanta Devi, the queen, chosen for her suitability, her pliancy; the trade-off has meant a loss of her identity in the course of a lifetime of compromises, of adjustments to suit the kingly needs of the head of Devapur State.

Shanta Devi is an arranged match to an equally pliant prince. She comes from a proper family, equally royal in its lineage and again and again, what is stressed is her docility. "The docility of the girl enchants the Agent." (p. 21). Manjula guesses correctly that, though pretty, the bride lacks in spirit: "Manjula sighs but rationalises: spirited responses are not conducive to happiness under the British Raj and happiness is what she must seek for her son." (p. 22).

She cannot foresee that the very docility that has been so praised in Shanta Devi leads to an estrangement between her and her husband. The marriage yields no male issue, but three

daughters and the failure to produce an heir to the throne is attributed to the queen : "Their irritability concentrates on Shanta Devi, while Bawajiraj, whose sperm sexes the child, is not even named. As Mohini alone is adjudged responsible for the birth of the embarrassing boy, so Shanta Devi alone carries the obloquy for failing to bear a son." (p. 52). The tepidity of married life forces her husband, the king, into a string of liaisons until he meets Mohini, the spirited girl from the mountain valley, the girl who refuses to be swamped by the royal, rarefied atmosphere. Mohini in refusing to be his wife officially, chooses not to become another docile Shanta Devi, waiting patiently for her royal husband's visits to the inner apartments in the palace.

While economic problems are responsible for the drying up of communication between the partners in married life, as is seen in earlier novels, here we find alienation setting in amidst princely pomp and splendour. It is an impoverishment of the mind that leads to alienation here. The communion of spirits is wholly strange to her and her readiness to consent to the king's slightest wish makes him despise her all the more. She accepts Rabi and helplessly watches Mohini taking her place in husband's life. He takes her submissiveness for granted : "He knows and takes pride in it, that he would never accept a child of his wife's that he has not sired. That she accepts his, he considers both natural and his due." (p. 53). The double-standard operates all the way up to the royal chambers.

His relationship with his wife has been reduced to a mere physical activity and she wonders at his constant concubine's capacity to hold his attention, even after so many years of living together :

Her own communication with her husband has dwindled to monosyllables and silences. When they copulate, it sinks, on his part, to moans and grunts. For her part, she has long given up those cries of ecstasy feigned for pleasure during early married days. Now she merely surrenders herself without ceremony and dissociates her mind, a technique she has perfected to meet the situation. (p. 144).

She spends her last years with the passive bitterness that is slowly accumulated over a lengthy period of time powerless to expunge it or change the downward course of her life. She is the symbol of the passive feminine, stunted in her womanhood, stunted as a human being.

Mohini, at the other end, is more than a match for not only the Maharaja but also a host of people all against her. She fends off successfully the British power in the form of Sir Copeland the Resident, the court's authority in the shape of Thevarnal Rao the Dewan or the Chief Minister as well as the intricacies and complexities of life in the royal harem. She plays her lover Bawajiraj III at her own sweet will. She brings home at every available occasion a reminder that she is a free being, equally free to bestow or withdraw her favours as he does. To maintain her freedom, she refuses to be trapped into a formal marriage though she remains faithful to her first and only lover.

The episode wherein Mohini shows her king and lover how vulnerable and transient a union based on mere sexual attraction would be, is interesting enough. Bawajiraj, who has so far been immersed in his own desires and their gratification is made to sit up and notice that the woman too has her feelings, her desires. On the eve of his departure to the war, he realises this truth, bitter as it is to his male oriented outlook on life :

That desire was embedded there too. In her; in women. In sexual flesh, whether man or woman. That woman had her physical needs no less exigent than his own. Ripe, as he was ; and he managed to remember, a good bit younger. (p. 329).

The male he is, he finds it difficult to accept this doctrine of equality. Acceptance of equality leads also to the granting of freedom in matters of sexual fulfilment. Yet it is hard for him, who is used to having innumerable affairs, to stomach the very thought of Mohini being unfaithful to him : "What he would really have liked would have been to lock up her genitals while he went crusading, chaining the key to his breastplate..." (p. 329).

Somehow he tries to be fair minded as Mohini had asked him to be. With a wrench in his heart he bids her be free as she chooses to be, but pleads with her to keep her affairs away from his eyes, from his ears. His agony is needless. Mohini, for all her tormenting him, is spiritually attuned to him : "For Mohini there was, and there would be no other man." (p. 330) Through her the author expresses the changing ideas in choosing a mate and on married love. To what extent sex could be the basis of love and married life, and its repercussions on traditionally arranged marriages even under the best of social conditions, are brought out.

Mohini has no tangible hold over her lover. Yet her union with him is more enduring and meaningful than that of Shanta Devi. She is not the dressed up doll, the role that tradition has imposed upon the female members of the royal family. She is brave enough to face the problems and risks involved in her unorthodox stance. Her ultimate reward is a taste of freedom that is denied to other members of her class.

### **The Need for Nurturance**

The woman who is aware of the silent and invisible barriers against her and who overcome them, retaining her own sense of integrity is the one who is able to nurture people, men and women, in need. It is easier for a happily married woman to achieve this than the lone woman who has to spend all her energies towards battling in order to retain her identity. Kamala Markandaya opens up newer, mature frontiers in this latest novel by stressing the importance of filial and conjugal life. Gone is the emphasis on tensions in married life. Couples like Arthur and Mary Copeland, Therumal Rao and Vatsala, Manjula and the elder Raja, Mohini and Bawajiraj and finally Usha and Rabi, illustrate conjugal oneness. Sexual attraction, feminine beauty and desirability yield place to the nurturant aspect of woman.

The woman, unfailingly is more intelligent and maturer than her male counterpart. Mary Copeland is quicker to know the exigencies of life in an alien country and protects her



family with military precision against the inroads of alien culture. Sophie, in all her porcelain perfection with her cornflower eyes, is warned against Rabi by her mother. "A pagan race, not one of us." (p. 455). While Sir Arthur keeps a wary eye on the ruler and the minister, it is his wife who preserves the home and their heritage carefully.

Usha, the Dewan's daughter is wiser too, in many respects than Rabi. Unlike Mfira, she knows that an alliance with the Resident's daughter would spell trouble for Rabi and warns him subtly. Rabi, too, knows, that it is Usha who fits into the pattern of his life :

A woman of a pared and lucid grace with whom he could talk, or be still, who could move him, and move with him, effortlessly picking up where he left off their common strand. A woman who was at one with him, their lives interlocking at more than one level, with whom, it pleased him to feel, he could wait, or not, to come together. In their own country, in their own time. (p. 455).

The tension between the East and the West, the rich and the poor, the men and the women he resolved by focussing on the universality of human feelings as experienced by all, as members of the family of man. Enduring conjugal love is a matter of union of spirits. This silent communion that exists between the couples, helps them nurture a family successfully. The love of the parents for the children, white or brown, contributes towards the upbringing of balanced individuals, towards a well-adjusted society in which there could be a perfect blending of all that is best. There is no longer the deep pessimism that pervades *A Handful of Rice*, *Possession* and *A Silence of Desire*. What is pictured here is a harmonious concord of mature, human beings, who join together to find human solutions to existing problems.

Suffering as the result of struggle to overcome the inequalities in the social order, calls for the nurturant aspect of the woman. Prince or pauper, Rabi or Ravi, needs the hand of the ministering angel to overcome the difficulties and reach maturity. Rukmani, Sarojini, Premala, Roshan, Mira, Saroja,

Mohini, Usha—each has her own way of succouring the people around her, even though the man in her life, often seems to be a failure in the traditional masculine role, as husband and provider.

### **The Sisterhood of Man**

Kamala Markandaya has been accused of having blunted her Indian sensibility by being too long in the West. It could also be argued that her expatriate position has deepened her tragic vision.<sup>27</sup> The misery and the poverty of the average Indian and the fact that emancipation whether for the man or for the woman cannot be detached from poverty are more striking to the visiting Indian; at any rate the author belongs to the group of writers who underwent the trauma of foreign rule and cannot forget easily the repercussions thereof. Still it is to her credit that she occupies herself with the literature of concern, with issues that are larger than private consciousness or woman's grievances or male-female hostility. Her sympathies lie with the less fortunate, the oppressed, the weak and it is thus she exclaims against the injustice of sexism. She protests against allotting rights according to wealth, power and sex rather than plain humanity.

Her commitment to social issues makes her write, oblivious of her own sex, from a longing for a higher moral coherence. She writes as a woman who has attained a sexual equality which comes only when one is not obsessed by one's own sex. Hers is the truly enlightened mind that does not think separately or singularly of sex to the exclusion of other vital issues, affecting the welfare of mankind as a whole. She is not part of an elitist feminist movement that addresses itself largely to economically and professionally secure women. Through her fiction she gives fresh insights into the ambivalence of change in women and men, in human nature.

If in her examination of human nature, she seems to provide a platform of propaganda against the evils of society, it is

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27. Margaret Joseph, *Kamala Markandaya*, p. 217.

because she is convinced that emancipation is closely linked to the eradication of poverty. A member of the empty-belly race, man or woman, cannot think of any need other than the immediate one of satisfying hunger. This is the reason her novels constitute a tirade against physical hunger, want and depravity which, she knows, inevitably lead on to spiritual hunger and apathy. The women in the earlier novels fight a ceaseless battle against poverty. Rukmani in the village and Nalini in the city can trace all their problems to the lack of money; they do not have enough to guarantee an ordinary predictable mode of living. Through these women the author exposes the harrowing experiences of the poor and urges us to find humane solutions.

Material prosperity is just half of the picture. What the woman ultimately needs is a vision of herself with power, enough to assert herself in her life, enough to motivate her and others around her towards the welfare of the human race. It is difficult to translate this vision of hers into practical living—yet women who manage to do so, women like Roshan, Mira, Anasuya, Mohini and Usha, are successful not only in overcoming the inequalities, the invisible barriers against the female sex in the existing social system; they also act as potent forces of social change by themselves. Compared to them, the men in their lives, men like Govind, Kit, Valmiki, Ravi, Nathan, Bawajiraj and Rabi do appear weak and incapable of fulfilling the traditional masculine role. They are failures as husbands, as protectors and as providers. Often it is the woman who shores up the male protagonist from collapse. The pattern runs true from the earliest to the latest novel, *The Golden Honeycomb*, where, at every momentous turn in his life, Rabi is helped onwards by a woman—Manjula, Mohini, Janaki, Jaya, Sophie, and Usha are there, at every crucial stage to provide succour and motivation.

### **The New Frontier**

The new frontier is now the new type of family created by the social upheavals in contemporary Indian life. The joint

family is almost extinct in Markandaya's fiction.<sup>28</sup> It is the husband and wife with children who constitute the family. The elders are dead or are brushed aside unequivocally. Dandekar and Sarojini do not have relatives meddling in their affairs. They build and battle on their own, almost like a Western couple. The illusion, however, is shattered all too frequently, whenever Dandekar tries to exhibit control and exact obedience in the manner of the traditional husband.

In the few stories where the older generation is present, it is of no direct consequence to the progress of the story : Ravi's old father or Manjula, the grandmother, influence the protagonist only in an indirect manner. The rising cost of living added to the influx of Western values have started to shrink the Indian family. The East not only accommodates Western notions but also compliments them with imitations. In the process the succour and caring that are inherent in the joint family system have been lost and the autonomy of spirit that is the hallmark of the Western way of living is still to be attained.

The awakening of the woman's consciousness results in changing ideas in choosing a mate, on married love, on sex, on virginity and on sex as the basis of married life. This results in innovations in literary expression too. Mira's liaison with Richard, Caroline's total uninhibited possession of Val, Lalitha's seduction by Gupta and her aborting the baby, Ravi teaching his bride the art of love in his one room lair, and Rabi's graphic encounters with his beloved ladies, one after the other, constitute a total departure from the tone set by the

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28. N.C. Chaudhry, *To Live or Not To Live* (New Delhi : Orient, 1970), p. 122. He describes the plight of the Indian joint family that has lost the harmony and contentment coming from common living without acquiring the individual enterprise of a unitary family : "The unwillingness to make a definite choice between the two types of family is, therefore, bringing into existence all sorts of hybrids of the joint family, each one of which is more unsatisfactory than the old large joint family." He also adds : "Even when the joint family is broken up through economic necessity, it continues to receive a token loyalty from all concerned. As I cannot emphasize it enough, it is never rejected in principle."

older writers like Anand, Rao and Narayan. The woman is no more the perfectly dressed paper doll ; she does not parrot the acceptable and the presumably the desirable answers in matters of love and sex. Whether she is poor like Rukmani or a princess like Mohini, she takes the initiative, often enough. She brings a whiff of fresh air into a repressed, puritanical society.

Yet we are made aware of the danger of excessive eroticism. It leads to decadence, to women 'doomed to conquer' as is seen in *Possession*. Separating love from sex and both from procreation would lead to the disintegration of people and society, as Saroja learns at the expense of her sister. What is lauded is not torrid sex, not even the tender boy and girl love but love of family, of the country, of the human race itself. This is seen in the union of Rabi and Usha. They come together, of one accord, without any recourse to words, gestures, let alone sexual overtures. Roshan, Anasuya, and now Usha illustrate how love based solely on the narrow grounds of sex could get debased into mere possession and would lead them to doomed womanhood. Women like Kunthi and Lalitha who opt wholly for sex, women showy like a comet's tail, who base their lives on female beauty and sexual desirability come to grief. Markandaya advocates a larger concept of love. While Rukmani battles for autonomy, Nalini and Sarojini show us the need for nurturance and Usha teaches us about universal sisterhood.

What is stressed now is the shared humanity of man. The tenderness of conjugal love and the family life, man's love for children and grandchildren tell us about the resemblances between people, pink, brown or black. The unity of spirit between Rabi and Usha, the Dewan and his wife Vatsala, Arthur and Mary Copeland is illustrative of the underlying unity of races, the unity which can be destroyed temporarily by accidents of history. This harmonious concord between human beings is necessary to solve the problems of society, the tensions of East-West confrontation and male-female hostility. Autonomy for the self and nurturance of the family should lead to imaginative sympathy for the human race.

Roshan, Anasuya, Mira and not to omit Usha, by shattering the false pedestal of the dependent woman, do not seek to substitute the limiting traditional concept of the female by an equally limiting feminist perspective, freezing themselves in reaction against men and family life. Bickering between the sexes is futile as humanity is more than just mere species. The starting point for cultivating warm human relationships is conjugal love. Markandaya, like Betty Freidan in *The Second Stage*, advocates the importance of family life for deepening the woman's awareness of her responsibility towards mankind. While it is true that a woman is not an appurtenance and marriage is not a career, that motherhood is not the great marvel it was deemed to be, it is now seen that conjugal oneness and enduring family life are the necessary first steps in preserving a woman's needs of nurturing, of warm familial relationships.<sup>29</sup>

The vision is one of togetherness—of people working and living closely together, of people not being segmented internally. This would enable the woman to meet the challenges of life in tune with her own potential and in solidarity with others. Here, in her vision of the sisterhood of the human race, lies the key to the quest of meaningful life in general and individual life in particular. In the evolution of Rukmani towards Usha, we see a process of inner human enrichment where such things as insight, joy and happiness are meaningless unless one also contribute to the insight, joy and happiness of others.

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29. Betty Friedan, *The Second Stage* (New York : Summit Books ,1981).

## CHAPTER 6

# Anita Desai : The Sexist Nature of Sanity

*I looked and it was a revelation : this world was a masculine world, my childhood had been nourished by myths forged by men and I hadn't reacted to them in at all the same way I should have done if I had been a boy.*

—Simone de Beauvoir,  
*Force of Circumstance*<sup>1</sup>

*This is not natural, I told myself, this cannot be natural. There is something weird about me now, wherever I go, whatever I see, whatever I listen to has this unnaturalness to it. This is insanity. But who, what is insane ? I myself ? Or the world around me ?*

—Anita Desai,  
*Cry, The Peacock*<sup>2</sup>

*Monisha, standing in the doorway, suddenly called out her first independent sentence of the evening "Amla", she cried in the sudden, harsh tone of a night jar, a wild bird flushed from some unexplored depth of jungle, "Amla, always go in the opposite direction ;"*

—Anita Desai,  
*Voices in the City*<sup>3</sup>

*How could she tell, how decide ? Which half of her life was real and which unreal ? Which of her selves was true,*

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1. Simone de Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, translated by Richard Howard (1963 ; rpt. Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1976), p. 103.
  2. Anita Desai, *Cry, the Peacock* (1963 rpt. New Delhi : Orient, 1980), p. 145. All further page references are to this edition of the text.
  3. Desai, *Voices in the City* (1965, rpt. New Delhi : Orient, 1968), p. 160. All further references are from this edition of the text.

*which false? All she knew was that there were two periods to her life, each in direct opposition to the other..... All was bright, all was blurred, all was in a whirl..... No, Life had no periods, no stretches; It simply swirled around, muddling and confusing, leading nowhere.*

—Anita Desai,  
*Where Shall We Go This Summer?*<sup>4</sup>

*With her inner eye she saw how her own house and its particular history linked and contained her as well as her whole family with all their separate histories and experiences—not binding them within some dead and airless cell but giving them the soil in which to send their roots and food to make them grow and spread, reach out to new experiences and new lives, but always drawing from the same soil, the same secret darkness. That soil contained all time, past and future, in it. It was dark with time, rich with time.*

—Anita Desai,  
*Clear Light of a Day*<sup>5</sup>

*Death is only a vanishing point of the physical in which a personality is cast and functions; that same personality is unperceived before a conception, and will be lost sight of again at death, which, we repeat, is a vanishing point and not the end.*

—R.K. Narayan,  
*My Days*<sup>6</sup>

Anita Desai's novels constitute together the documentation, through fiction, of radical female resistance against a patriarchally defined concept of normality. She finds the links between female duality, myth and psychosis intriguing; each heroine is seen as searching for, finding and absorbing or annihilating the double who represents the socially impermissible aspects of her femininity. Sexual politics and madness have been noticed and treated as concomitant aspects of the awakened feminine consciousness, both in contemporary Indian

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4. Desai, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1975), pp. 111-112. All further references are from this edition of the text.
  5. Desai, *Clear Light of Day* (New Delhi: Allied, 1980), p. 182. Further, page references are from this edition of the text.
  6. R.K. Narayan, *My Days: A Memoir* (1973, rpt. Mysore: Indian Thought, 1975), p. 142.



and Western fiction.<sup>7</sup> Anita Desai, among contemporary Indian novelists, bring fresh insights to the sexist nature of the issue of sanity.

Her female protagonist points out 'the mad clarity' of all family relationships, the farcical nature of all marriages, the illusory quality of all human relationships, male and female. There is not only a rejection of the unquestioning acceptance of the traditional female role. What she portrays is the deeply felt and suffered rebellion against the entire system of social relationships. There is a question towards the concept of 'real love'. The quest is by no means successful. Cinderella does not hope to live happily ever after—she does not 'live' at all. Yet it is this unhappy, unfulfilled 'mad' woman who, occupying the centre stage in Desai's fiction, proves to be a more attractive, more rich and finely tuned being than all the doers and achievers one has come across so far.

### The Loner, the Loser

The passive feminine has ceased to exist. In her place we have the highly intelligent, sensitive woman who questions ceaselessly. She looks around and refuses to accept anymore the myths created and nourished by a male ordained society. She reacts against the curious combination of passion and romance, custom and convenience and other tradeoffs to meet dependency needs that have drawn and held men and women in the past. She is sensitive enough to react violently and her reaction which is abrupt and unexpected earns her the sobriquet of being insane at best, of being abnormal.

The insensibility of the people around her and the societal pressure points shrink her capacity for communality, co-

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7. See Patricia Stubbs, *Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1979). This is a documentation of radical feminist resistance through fiction in Western Literature.

See also B.M. Rigae, *Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978). It treats the relationship between madness and female condition in Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, Doris Lessing's *The Four-Gated City* and Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*.

operation and communication. She who is expected in an ideological male hierarchy to dampen the results of male chauvinist excesses, she who is expected, by being feminine, passive and more emotionally vulnerable than men, to create and foster social harmony, tests the limits that realistic fiction imposes on women. The very Achilles heel of being genetically and socially programmed as being more susceptible to emotional fluctuations and depression is double-edged. On the one hand it enables her to feel more intensely and to experience more deeply than her male counterpart. On the other hand she suffers more and feels more deeply the harsh sting of dislocation between ideology and reality. The discrepancy between what she aspires or sets out to do in life and the harsh reality confronting her plunges her into abymal anguish. The female protagonist here is thus a loner and inevitably a loser who grapples to win some understanding out of an intensely privatised world of personal emotions. She is the failed quester who tries hard to hurtle past the emotional blocks set up by an unheeding, insensitive social environment.

Failed questers these women may be—often they end their lives in the harsh glare of a suicide or a murder preceded by a heightened consciousness that is glibly dubbed insanity; yet they are attractive figures, realistically portrayed and are credible enough. Anita Desai illustrates, through these women, a spacious panoply of themes in her novels, ranging from left wing politics, feminism, sexual licence, generation gaps, the persistent rivalry between marriage, career and self-fulfilment the polemics of tradition, change, religion, the ambiguities of personal and cultural liberation, the pulling tensions in familial relationships, lust, guilt, incest, female narcissism, the restlessness of intellectual women leading to self-delusion, fragmentation, schizophrenia and all the bedrock hurt connections between men and women.

### **Abnormal Consciousness**

The term 'abnormal consciousness' is used here to designate the mental state of heightened receptivity experienced by the woman. The female protagonist in each novel of Desai

has that heightened imagination and certain extra amount of intelligence to realise the extraordinary queerness and mysteriousness of the world in which she lives.<sup>8</sup> This awareness, this sensitivity to external environment, both physical and mental, passes by her male counterpart totally. While she thrums and quivers like a finely tuned musical instrument, he is stolid, glum and impervious to her finer vibrations. The tragedy in each novel can be finally traced back to this disparity in sensibilities, male and female. Maya and Gautama in *City the Proud*, Monisha and Jiban in *Voices in the City*, Sita and Rama in *Where Shall We Go this Summer?*, Nanda Kaul and her Vice-Chancellor husband in *Fire on the Mountain* and the majestic solitary Binla with her cramped, guttering suitor Dr. Biswas in *Clear Light of Day* are illustrative of the inelegance inherent in such relationships.

It is the woman, sensitive as she is, who is aware of the malaise in all human relationships. She tries to peel off the unwanted, the non-essentials, to limit herself to the purest core of feeling, the innermost singity of bare thought, and to rid herself of the meanness of quotidian existence. Her extraordinary awareness brings home with sharpness the disparity between herself and other mundane beings around her. The contradiction inherent in such a situation makes her feel that every gratification of human desire is turned either into a sin or a sickness. This consciousness brings her on the edge of her emotional forbearance, time and again, too intense to be borne, too painful to be ignored. She has to choose between death and a mean existence, in order to avoid being caught and rebuffed and humiliated repeatedly in the human whiplash. Maya and Monisha choose the way out in death, Sita, Anila and Nanda Kaul compromise with bitterness while Bin, the protagonist of the latest novel, *Clear Light of Day*, emerges from

8. A list of Amit Desai's novels and two collections of short stories would prove useful for the purposes of this study: *City the Proud*, 1965; *Voices in the City*, 1965; *The Day, The Night*, 1971; *Where Shall We Go this Summer?*, 1975; *Fire on the Mountain*, 1977; *Clear Light of Day*, 1980; *Games at Twilight*, 1978; *The Proud & Quaint*, 1980.

the bitterness of compromise into a visionary intuition of the continuity of life.

The reader benefits from treating the novels chronologically as they document steadily the changing function of the concept of sanity in women in Anita Desai's fictional world. The thematic development of mental experience in the novels can be traced through the three stages of self delusion, fragmentation and schizophrenia and finally visionary intuition. The awakening of the woman's consciousness progresses to the psychology of self-realisation. She achieves self awareness by defining herself against social matrices. When the societal pressure points, being inexorable, give excruciating pain, there is a mental breakdown or collapse which allows an escape by self-delusion. This delusion is a temporary phase in as much as her high intelligence and acumen drive her onwards to full confrontation with reality and face the consequences.

Hence, when Monisha and Maya are regarded as mad women or when Sita and Bim are categorized as being abnormal, one cannot concur with the injustice involved in such labelling for, in each instance, it is the way of the woman to overcome the adversary relationship with the world by having recourse to instinctive healing madness. It is difficult, however, to rise above labelling in art as well as in life. Maya is definitely pronounced mad and we leave her at the end of the novel, awaiting transfer to a mental asylum. Monisha in that final frenzied moment, when realisation of the inescapable nature of her mean existence hits her and she pours kerosene over herself and sets herself ablaze, is definitely regarded as a mad woman by her insensitive and insensible family members.

Sita happily married externally, mother of four children with a fifth on the way decides to leave everything as it is and tries to conceal herself in the lonely, isolated rain battered island of Manori. Smoking like a chimney, abandoning husband and children, sinking herself into her childhood pleasure of mud pies and sea shells, she seems lost to the world. The old servants and passers-by are aghast : "Playing in the mud", she (Jameela) gasped, "that old plain woman !" Moses the

family watchman-cum-housekeeper dismisses her with the usual label : "She was mad...so angry always. So angry with me, angry with Miriam, angry because it rained, angry because there was no food—always angry. Mad people are like that. Let her go. Who cares?" (p. 114).

Bim, decaying in a decaying house amidst the ruins of old Delhi with her mentally retarded brother, spurning conventional life, its obligations and enticements is another example. In *Fire on the Mountain* there are Nanda Kaul, the old aristocratic lady and her pyromaniac, of a great-grand daughter Raka. Both are called the crazy ones at Carignano, their retreat at Kasauli. Both are equally lonely outcastes—the elder one feeding on imagined past grandeur, trying to confront her loneliness and live down a lifetime of humiliation and desolation and the younger one recovering from the ills of typhoid and a battered homelife, seeking her relief in the fire on the mountain-side.

### **The Transpersonal Vision**

Each novel is both a questing forward and a return to the concerns of the earlier fiction, namely the identity and the sensibility of the woman at deeper levels of meaning and complexity. It is a reaching outward because the female protagonist is on a quest for psychic and transcendental unity. The novels chart the gradual conversion of the abnormal consciousness from passive to active, negative to positive, from recorder of a reality, initially perceived outside the self (Maya with the dire prophesy of the albino soothsayer) to creator of a reality ultimately construed as a function of the mind as it transcends the labels of subjective or objective (Bim, *Clear Light of Day*, p. 182). In this evolution, a depersonalised psychotic vision is gradually transformed into a transpersonal mystic one. Reality becomes a creation of the mind rather than the converse.

Anita Desai, writing as a novelist and not a psychologist, has, however, inherited the contemporary theories about the unconsciousness, the significance of dreams, mental illness like

schizophrenia and involuntary mental experience. She does not deny the existence but uses them only for imaginative mining for the purpose of creating fiction. Though she is not engaged in creating a metaphysics of consciousness, she is undeniably interested in the life of the mind. Her interest in the consciousness of the woman in her novel enables us to see the Indian woman adequately from the inside. Part of the problems confronting her female protagonist are not peculiar, we realise, to fiction alone nor are they peculiar to the Indian woman. They are part of the universal malaise afflicting women worldwide in fact and in fiction. Nor are the pulling tensions in human relationships confined to one gender alone; her attractive characters, the loners and the losers who grapple with understanding their private universe include some sensitive introspective men too, like Nirode in *Voices in the City* and Raja in *Clear Light of Day*. But it cannot be denied that these are a few in number while her female protagonists outshine and outrank them effortlessly.

While she attempts, through a transpersonal vision, to search for an alternative lifestyle to ensure a better, more enriched and meaningful life for all, all the disinherited to the earth, men and women, she does not dwell on the haves and have nots 'the empty belly race' that Kamala Markandaya grapples with. Though the economics of living crops up here and there as in Bim having to take to lecturing in History to maintain herself and her younger brother, by and large, the novelist skirts aside the class issue. She is occupied with interiorising the consciousness of the woman and the economics of life do not bother her except when they are noticed as adding to the chilling, monotonous and soulless aspect of existence.

In simpler times, happy stories ended with a marriage proposal or a wedding. Here in Desai's fictional world, living happily ever after, in the old-fashioned sense is the very fate her heroines struggle to escape. Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's heroines get married in the conventional manner or settle down to the existing life with complacency, their erstwhile rebellions having been nothing more than firecracker fizzles.

But Desai's fictional women turn romance upside down. Here the girl meets or marries the boy, measures him and finds him inadequate and marches on her own separate way.

The woman is not a Gothic persecuted maiden. But her mental suffering brought on by insensitive social norms can be equally bad. Anita Desai shows us how the women have repeatedly to repress their emotions, their finer impulses, due to a social code, not of their own making. Constant rebuffs lead her on to utter humiliation and desolation. By showing each female protagonist at the end of her tether, Anita Desai is not seeking, incidentally, revenge, for the ills of Indian womanhood. She has fashioned a new concept of feminist fiction, not to only lock horns with male supremacy, but also to make us aware that we are not to settle for existence itself being absurdity, nausea or nothingness. The woman here is on a ceaseless quest, for a more meaningful life not only for herself but for humanity in general.

The woman stands in a position of sexual inferiority and emotional vulnerability from which she tries, not always successfully, to make an imaginative escape. But she, knowing what it is to be a woman, and a sensitive intelligent one, is a true rebel in her own individual way paving a path of revolt against the conventional exploitative system. She shows us that each of us inhabiting a privatised world of emotions can strike up for what one feels to be good, just and reasonable. Anita Desai is adept at constructing an imagined civilization whose mortar consists of our shared neuroses aspirations and manias but whose bricks are the resonances of language, the spell of story telling itself.

### **The Peacock's Cry**

Maya, the protagonist of *Cry the Peacock*, is a young girl who is obsessed by a childhood prophecy of disaster, a disaster that cannot be averted. The story is also one of marital discord imbued with a strong streak of neurotic fantasy on the part of the woman and a corresponding phlegmatic and stolid attitude on the part of her husband. She was brought up tenderly by

a doting father as "a toy princess in a toy world" (p. 89). She has been so sheltered and brought up as a privileged person that her husband later accuses her of living her life as a fairy tale :

What have you learnt of the realities ? The realities of common human existence, not love and romance, but living and dying and working all that constitutes life for the ordinary man. You won't find it in your picture books ; what wickedness to raise a child like that ; (p. 115).

As the story unfolds, we find the tragedy is not due solely to her living in the fantasy world as Gautama, the husband, labels it. Maya's capacity to love another human being, other than her father would be the litmus test of her psychic health. Gautama, the brilliant up and coming lawyer has neither the time nor the capability of showing tenderness towards her, at a time when she most needs it, buffeted as she is by the albino's prophecy of disaster and death in her life, four years after her marriage. His failure in the traditional role of a husband, as a protector, acts as a potent catalyst for her collapse.

Maya's quest is not only one woman's quest but the quest of a human being towards some understanding, some sympathy in her predicament. Her only brother had run away from home, her father is on a trip to Europe and Gautama, her husband, does not meet her even half way in trust, and affection. The failure of their marriage of minds renders everything doubtful and portentuous. The albino who reads her horoscope and predicts death for one of the partners in marriage after a married life of four years, hovers constantly in her fevered brain as a concealed dark figure of moral disability that inhibits her married life, both on the physical and mental levels and prevents consummation and the ordinary fulfilment of motherhood and family life.

Maya is pulled as it were, further into the fatal mechanism by Gautama. He is pragmatic, unimaginative and is deeply engrossed in his work. Hints are thrown about his lack of sexual interest in his wife ; in his tender moments which are



rare, he looks down upon her as a tiresome, pretty but wayward infant, the spoilt daughter of a rich father. He knows enough Freud to suspect that she consented to marry him readily as she saw him first as a surrogate father, (p. 40) and then as husband. He is in a way jealous of her father and his respect and friendship for the older man get steadily eroded, causing one more area of searing pain and bewilderment to Maya.

She compares herself to the peacock who mates only after fighting: "When they have exhausted themselves in battle, they will mate. Peacocks are wise. The hundred eyes upon their tails have seen the truth of life and death and know them to be one. Living, they are aware of death. Dying they are in love with life. 'Lover Lover', you will hear them cry in the forests when the rain-clouds come, 'Lover, I die'. (pp. 95-96). The reference to the peacocks as ill-fated lovers occurs frequently in Desai's work. Here it is the central symbol around which the story is built.

Like the peacock, she loves intensely and her love is totally unreciprocated. She laments that he cannot give companionship for "a light-headed woman, a childish one like her: In his world there were vast areas in which he would never permit me, and he could not understand that I could even wish to enter them, foreign as they were to me. On his part, understanding was scant, love was meagre. Not to be loved as one does love!" (p. 104).

Her honest appraisal of herself brings in fresh pain. Hers is a childish face which may charm him for a moment, divert his attention for some time: "But to capture him entirely, if a fleshly face could do it, it would have to be a finer one, the elongated, etiolated one of an intellectual, refined by thought and reflection, bereft of the weakness of impulses, aloof from coarseness and freshness." (p. 105). Her longing for his love, he laughs off as melodrama. When she desires a close contact with him, to ease her anguish, he preaches the Gita's doctrine of non-attachment to her.

Maya is pushed to the limit of her emotional tether by an actively cruel environment. Her husband is totally unsympathetic and she feels he is not on her side at all, 'but across a river, across a mountain and would always remain so.' (p. 114) She slowly gives up her efforts to catch his attention, to force him to share in her troubled thought processes. She states wearily: "You shall never help me. It is all true. One of us will win, the other must lose." (p. 114). Gautama, kept in the dark about the soothsayer's prophesy, tells her that she is neurotic, that she is insane. (pp. 114, 115). Slowly the events and the tensions pile up leading to the final catastrophe

Yet the tragedy could have been averted with a little bit of communication, a touch of accommodation on Gautama's part. Maya is the first of many examples of the isolated trapped psyche in Desai's fiction. She is viewed here, in the conventional manner, as a problem. Rather than propose societal accommodation to her needs, the prosaic world around her, which consists of dry, astringent Gautama and his equally dry, and busy mother and sister, suggest that she is in need of therapy.<sup>9</sup> She is denied the fulfilment in marriage that is visible in her friend Leila's married life with her tubercular husband. She is denied the warmth and the nurturance of motherhood that Pom, her other friend, exhibits. She finds that these friends cannot act as her anchor anymore. The albino's dire prophecy drums in her fevered brain and there is no one to ward it off. She feels defenceless and utterly alone.

Arjuna's letter arrives to reinforce her memory about the prophecy :

I remembered, remembered and how much I should have given to forget it all. What I had forgotten was

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9. See Ferdinand Lundberg and Margaria Farnham, *Modern Woman : The Lost Sex* (1947, rpt. New York : Grosset Dunlap, 1978), pp. 235-36. They state that women's new exertions to be equals to men drive them into masculinisation at the expense of feminine satisfaction. The woman becomes a social problem : "The distortions of character under the pressure of modern attitudes and upbringing is driving women steadily deeper into personal conflicts soluble only by psychotherapy."

the magic of my father's gentle words that had once had the power to soothe and console me. Now nothing calmed me. There was no magic that was not black. What I yearned for as the only thing that could save me from insanity, if not from the violence of an insane death, escaped me now. (p. 176).

The alienation is complete. The battle between the two worlds, the receding one of grace and the approaching one of madness, breaks her physically and mentally. She is alert and sensitive enough to be aware of her schizophrenic state :

All order is gone out of my life, all formality. There is no plan, no place, nothing to keep me within the pattern of familiar everyday living and doing that becomes those whom God means to live on earth. Thoughts come, incidents occur, then they are scattered and disappear. Past, present, future. Truth and Untruth. They shuffle back and forth, a shifting chiaroscuro of light and shade, of blood and ashes. And I am tired of it. My body can no longer bear it, my mind has already given way. (p. 179).

Yet she loves life intensely and it is not easy to give it up. She recalls the golden days of her childhood spent at Lucknow, and Darjeeling (p. 178). She thunders at her husband : "The world is full - full, Gaurama. Do you know what that means ?" (p. 186). Time and again she waits eagerly, she begs him to meet her halfway in her own world and not merely demand of her, brusquely to join him in his drab, dry world that is so threatening to her. She finally gives up her struggle with him, the effort to make him see her predicament and excludes him from her life :

The man had no contact with the world, or with me. What would it matter to him if he died and lost even the possibility of contact ? What would it matter to him ? It was I, I who screamed with the peacocks, screamed at the sight of the rainclouds, screamed at their disappearance, screamed in mute horror. (p. 175).

All that is left of the marriage is a feeling of pity, of regret, a wanton waste for she is conscious of "the great passage that always had and still existed between us, like an unpassable desert." (p. 201).

No longer does she query about her sanity, about her relationship with Gautma. Her fevered brain with its firm hold on life ("This is mine, mine, this life is mine", p. 188) closes itself to reality and fixes on the idea that it is Gautama's life that is threatened. (p. 164). She lays her plans carefully, slyly (pp. 151, 165, 169). It is the basic instinct for survival against all odds. She rationalises after the event, after her impulsive push that sends him hurtling down from the terrace to death: "It had to be one of us, you see, and it was so clear that it was I who was meant to live. You see, to Gautma, it didn't really matter. He didn't care, and I did." (p. 216).

Gautama had tried to train her in non-attachment, had warned her that 'love' transformed into attachment would lead her to a passion of unhappiness in its loss, depression and disillusionment. He exhorts her to train herself to be a yogi, a sannyasi who sets himself free from attachment and disillusionment. Consequently he is free from fear and danger of perishing. The consolation that the Hindu religion holds out cannot be grasped by Maya, who, Gautama finds, is surprisingly, occidental in her views regarding life and death. (p. 121). She conceives of life as one brief episode into which all experience, all success and all virtue must be crammed for it is all too brief. She is all too conscious of the brevity of love, of all human relationships and she cannot concede easily victory to the doctrine of *Karma*, of inexorable life and death and punishment as parts of an immortal cyclic process to which all humanity is bound forever.

Herein lies the cause of her anguish. There is no human contact, no friendly touch to tide her over her spiritual crisis and she passes before our eyes as agitated as a nightmare, an illusion. She is indeed aptly named Maya as her quest for a more meaningful life proves to be illusory. The discontinuity between innocence and experience and the impediments to sexual and spiritual fulfilment are shown to lie as much in fear and the possessive character of human attachments as in the inhibitions imposed by a taboo ridden society.

## Absolute Negation

If Maya is saddled with an unimaginative unsympathetic partner, Monisha's Jiban ranks even lower on the scale. He does not have the pragmatism of the hard hitting legal minded Gautama. He is stolidity personified, a minion in government service, growing flaccid on rice and rich sweetmeats, on comfortable government salaries and allowances. He is an uncontrolled vacuum, a solid blank wall. While she quivers like a running fork, no despair, and no agony of doubt or will ever ripples the placidity of his existence. To a girl, vulnerable on many points, her marriage is the most excruciating, destructive and negative of all social institutions that trap and torture her isolated, sensitive psyche.

Her Kafkaesque speculation as revealed to us through her diary, plunges the reader to the limits of abysmal self-destruction. The ending of *Cry the Peacock* leaves the nature of the heroine's illness her treatment largely undefined. Her needs for nurturance and for being nurtured are left unfulfilled by a husband who is incapable of 'husbanding' her in his traditional masculine role. Here the flaw in the centre of her life has rotted her from within; Monisha, her tubes being blocked, her world narrowed down to a barred room in a joint family prison, has no way of escape. The choice boils down once again to mean existence or death. Being a finally tuned, sensitive being, pared to lucidity, her choice is immediate and not difficult for her after all. The fault is with the actively cruel social environment, not with her.<sup>10</sup>

Is the institution of marriage as such to be blamed for marital unhappiness? Hindu life in the joint family equates implicitly mental health with domesticity and any deviation from the cult of traditional womanhood is judged to

10. Mirra Kumrowsky, "Cultural Contradictions and Sex Roles", *The American Journal of Sociology*, 52 (November 1936), pp. 184-89. She states that the source of inconsistency lay with society itself and not with the individual women analysed in her study. According to her, the remedy for their situation is not individual therapy but rather in social reconstruction.

be a violation of this morality of mental health. *Voices in the City*, by portraying the lives of two intelligent and sensitive sisters, Amla and Monisha, underlines Desai's genuine radicalism, her ability to discern the fundamentally coercive nature of seemingly benevolent institutions like arranged marriage and joint-family system by portraying them as causes of mental disease. The distinction between normality and disorder, between sanity and insanity being thin and marginal, she suggests that sanity might be a dubious, even a reactionary norm. The sensitive human being whether it is male or female, Monisha or Nirode, has to dull his/her ardour for reform, for a more meaningful life, lest madness ensue.

Sociologists like Ferdinand Lundberg and M. Farnham make a neat line of division between the male road of exploit and the female one of nurture. The truly healthy woman, according to them, is one who responds passively to male energy, accepting dependence upon the male to achieve the final goal of sexual life and motherhood. All other feminine striving for achievement is dismissed as mere envy and out of place. The Hindu social code concurs in this view in upholding motherhood as the most sacred function of the woman and regards feminine ambition external to the family as diseased.<sup>11</sup> Intellectuality in women is deemed as a direct betrayal of their fundamental feminine nature. If a woman like Monisha yields to cold, unproductive thinking, she is considered unnatural; if she protests against her ordained lot, she is labelled neurotic and masculinised.

This view is not peculiar to the Indian social set up. The psychologist Helene Deutsch states :

Only exceptionally talented girls can carry a surplus of intellect without injuring their affective lives for woman's intellect, her capacity for objectively understanding life, thrives at the expense of her subjective emotional qualities.<sup>12</sup>

11. Ananda Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva* (New York : The Noonday Press, 1957), p. 102.

12. Helene Deutsch, *The Psychology of Women : A Psychoanalytic Interpretation*. Vol. I, 'Girlhood' (1944 ; rpt. New York : Bantam, 1973), pp. 124,

The malady afflicting the female protagonist is not neatly explained in a too pat and hence unconvincing manner ; Desai has wisely declined to wear the mantle of psychiatric omniscience. What she deals with is the social problems caused by the tensions of modern womanhood rather than the crisis in mental health as such. The remedy lies not in individual therapy but rather in social reconstruction.<sup>12</sup>

Until then, women like Monisha, Sita and Bim live not with defeatism but absolute negation. In earlier times women were bolstered by faith to endure, to survive. Now the lack of faith and the ceaseless questioning and questing pave the way for their undoing. Women of ability and painful sensibility, they are unprepared to battle against the degradation in store for them. Whether out of ignorance or intent, they offend against the inexorable requirements of a religious and social order and finally their subversive individualism stands cornered. In the final analysis the woman is always in the wrong.

Symbols of imagination and sensibility, these women are pitted against the dehumanising forces abroad in Indian society. When they seek a higher communion of free spirits, they are forced to conform and yet are denied even the ordinary comforts in marriage and motherhood that lesser mortals are blessed with. The compulsion to succeed in con-

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12 (*Contd.*)

146, 280-31, 293. According to her, intellectuality represents a direct betrayal of a woman's fundamental feminine nature. She echoes Lundberg and Farnham : "All observations point out the fact that the intellectual woman is masculinised ; in her, warm intuitive knowledge has yielded to cold unproductive thinking." Thus, women's worldly achievements are deemed unnatural, their protests seen as neurotic expressions of dissatisfaction with their ordained lot : "By identifying themselves with the socially oppressed or the non-possessing class, they take up a position against their own unsatisfying role."

13. Mirra Komorovsky, "Cultural Contradictions and Sex Roles", pp. 133-39. She rightly concludes : The problem will persist until the adult sex roles of women are redefined in greater harmony with the socio-economic and ideological character of modern society. Until then neither the formal education nor the unverbaised sex roles of the adolescent woman can be cleared of intrinsic contradiction.

formity leads them to despise themselves. Faced with negation, they become images of isolation, fear, bewilderment and potential violation. Objective awareness inevitably leads on to morbid introversion and madness serves as a way of withdrawal from spiritual and emotional confusion in a tired context, in a worn-out culture.

### **'Go in the Opposite Direction'**

*Voices in the City* deals with the corrosive effects of life in Calcutta on three sensitive individuals—Nirode and his two sisters, Amla and Monisha. It is Monisha, the eldest who fills the novel entirely by reason of her reaction to her servile existence within the rigid confines of a traditional Hindu family. Amla, the younger sister, learns a great deal from Monisha's death by suicide :

She knew that Monisha's death had pointed the way for her and would never allow her to lose herself. She knew she would go through life with her feet primly shod, involving herself with her drawings and safe people precisely because Monisha had given her a glimpse of what lay on the other side of this stark, uncompromising origin. (p. 348).

Amla, as her aunt points out, has the independence of education and pride in her ability to choose a career as a commercial artist. She weathers out her connection with Dharma the painter and arrives at a workable compromise bitter as it is, to get by in life. 'To go in the opposite direction' as Monisha advises her, to say 'no', involves a great deal of courage, the sort of courage that Monisha displays, that leads her on to her death. The two sisters constitute an interesting study. They are similar up to a point—Monisha marches bravely on to her magnificent end while Amla digs her heels in, aware of what she is missing, despising herself for compromising, grappling with the powerful reality of the senselessness, the negative quality of life.

Monisha is not like any other Bengali woman ; she is not as Nirode points out, "one of those vast, soft, masses-of-rice Bengali women with a bunch of keys at her waist and nothing



in her head but a reckoning of the 'stores in her pantry and nothing in her heart but a stupid sense of injury and affront.' (p. 81). She is an intellectual, cast among phillistines. Her wardrobe stocked with Kafka ; Dostoevsky, Hopkins and French and Sanskrit works, amuses the ladies of the household. They with 'their indoor minds starless, darkless' talk about their dowries, saris and jewellery, babies and blocked fallopian tubes.

Her diary is evocative of the stifling atmosphere around her. Her arrival from Kalimpong to dusty crowded Calcutta, into the folds of this amoeba like family of Jiban is best told in her own words :

I feel a surreptitious push from Jiban and am propelled forward into the embrace of his mother who is all in white and smells of clean rice and who, while placing her hand on my head in blessing, also pushes a little harder than I think necessary and still harder till I realise what it means : I go down on my knees to touch her feet. Another pair of feet appears to receive my touch, then another. \*How they honour their own feet ; More, I lose count, but many more. (p. 109).

Life with her large secure, round keepers, her mother-in-law, sisters in law and uncles and aunts-in-law roofs her in ; she is reduced to peeping out of barred windows to catch a glimpse of the stars. She yearns for the free air of Kalimpong, of Darjeeling : 'The solitude of the jungles there, the aqueous shadows of the bamboo groves and the earth laid with great fallen leaves.' (p. 116). Solitude, silence, privacy, space and time for meditation, all these, her friends, are lost to her in Calcutta.

She wants to live on a higher plane of consciousness, like Nirode, getting rid of needless appurtenances, sticking to a life of essentials, of ideals, pared to a lucidity that is blinding in its clarity. The reality is different. "Look at me," she says, bitterly, "at my equipment, my appurtenances. My black wardrobe, my family, my duties of serving fresh chapatis to the uncles as they eat, of listening to my mother-in-law as

she tells me of the remarkably many ways of cooking fish, of being Jiban's wife. (p. 111).

Life has amounted to loss of all that she holds dear, loss of privacy, of intellectual freedom, of conscience, of ethics : "...all is shunned except the swelling and fattening of the iron safe and of mortal, male flesh." (p. 117). She is aware that this predicament is not singular to her :

I think of generations of Bengali women hidden behind the barred windows of half dark rooms, spending centuries in washing clothes, kneading dough and murmuring aloud verses from the *Bhagvad Gita* and the *Ramayana*, in the dim light of sooty lamps. Lives spent in waiting for nothing, waiting on men, self-centered and indifferent and hungry and demanding and critical, waiting for death and dying misunderstood, always behind bars, those terrifying black bars that shut us in, in the old houses, in the old city. (p. 120).

All the pettinesses, the trivialities of a mean existence overwhelm her and she bursts out : "What does it all mean ? Why are such lives as these lived ? At their conclusion, what solution, what truth falls into the waiting palm of one's hand, the still pit of one's heart ?" (p. 121). There is no answer she finds, except to cut the Gordian knot once and for all, dramatically ; instead of waiting for a slow mean death, as an end to an equally slow putrifying life, she feels it is better not to live, 'better to leap out of the window and end it all instead of smearing this endless sticky glue of senselessness over the world.' (p. 18).

Yet she is aware that most women survive, pretending to forget, pretending to believe in these trivialities, in this meanness of a stifling existence. They wash and iron and cook and nurture when they do not believe in it all. A tremendous force of will is needed to go in the opposite direction, to shed the unnecessary, to live the clean, husked, irreducible life that she envisages, that is beyond her : "If I had religious faith, I could easily enough renounce all this. But I have no faith, no alternative to my confused despair, there is no I give myself to and so I must stay." (p. 122).

## Life is a Puzzle

While she is puzzling about her life, about the meaning of all life on earth, with passion and pain, restrictions mount up against her in the family. Her 'round and secure keepers' as she calls her relatives, afford her little freedom, little privacy. 'I am still allowed letters' she says pathetically. When Nirode or Amla come to visit her, her keepers monitor her so closely, that both brother and sister are aghast "at the damp pressure of critical attention impossible to avoid in any corner of this house." (p. 159).

Monisha shrinks day by day, due to the frontal assaults on her, bodily and mentally. While her relatives discuss her, her bohemian brother and unconventional sister thoroughly, while they talk about her blocked fallopian tubes and malfunctioning ovaries that leave her barren, Monisha shrinks into herself, a vulnerable exposed being, trying hard to find a protective shell. Her duties in the family occupy enough of her time :

I am glad to be occupying myself in cutting vegetables, serving food, brushing small children's hair. Only I wish I were given some tasks I could do alone in privacy, away from the aunts and uncles, the cousins and nieces and nephews. Alone, I could work better, and I should feel more whole. But less and less there is privacy. (pp. 115-16).

She has no friend, no support whatsoever and she is reduced to a woman who pours out her feelings in a diary : "I do not like a woman who keeps a diary. Traceless, meaningless, uninvolved, does this not amount to non-existence, please?" (p. 140). No wonder she shrinks visibly day by day. She says : "I am already too small to be regarded much by anyone. I will be invisible yet." (p. 139).

She wonders if the element of love that is missing in her life would solve the problems. But intelligent as they are, both Nirode and she shirk, like Gautama, from love for fear of attachment. They recall the Gita's message of non-attachment that Gautama quotes at length to Maya.<sup>14</sup> Monisha is

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14. Desai, *Cry the Peacock*, p. 112. Gautama quotes the relevant excerpt from the *Bhagavad Gita* : "Thinking of sense objects, man becomes

aware that it is impossible to find love that is not binding, that is free of rules, obligations, complicity and all stirrings of mind or conscience. There is no love in her relationship with Jiban. She is so alienated from her husband that she has ceased to feel hurt or regret such a total separation from him. Her relationship with her brother and sister is too infrequent and guarded to make any lasting imprint on both sides. Her relationship with her mother is filled with an inbred and invalid sense of duty, of honour and concern, none of which is needed by the latter anyway, not from her in any case, being too whole, independent and complete on her own, without the crutches of love from her children.

Bleeding through life, having no faith, no alternative to confused despair, she feels love, as an awakened condition of the conscience, and not as physical passion and congenital connections, has withered and died in her heart. Self-awareness as in the other heroines of Desai leads to anguish and schizophrenic agitation. She travels fast from reality into a realm of still colourlessness, of bleak negation. In a flash of visionary intuition, she realises that her action to end it all would be the most courageous, magnificent of all her acts in an uncompromising, unconventional life.

She realises that the drama of life has gone by, neither birth nor death has touched her and that there is complete alienation, 'an empty white distance' between her and her fellow beings. She feels she has been put away in a steel container, or a thick glass cubicle without a touch of love or hate or warmth on her :

I am locked apart from them, they cannot touch me, they can only lip-read and misinterpret. Similarly, I cannot really hear them; I cannot understand what they say. I have never touched anyone, never left the imprint of my fingers on anyone's shoulders, of my ton-

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14 (Contd.)

attached thereto. From attachment arises longing and from longing is anger born. From anger arises delusion; from delusion, loss of memory is caused. From loss of memory, the discriminative faculty is ruined and from the ruin of discrimination, he perishes."

gue on anyone's damp palate. What a waste, what a waste it has been, this life enclosed in a locked container, merely as an observer, and so imperfect, so handicapped an observer at that. (pp. 239-40).

Completely alienated, she sets herself ablaze and dies before help could reach her. It is Nirode alone who realises the significance the value of Monisha's death, "too great a value to forgo out of distress or guilt, or deceit, but the very key of all grace, all design in life, the very essence of it, exquisite and irreducible." (p 250).

### **Motherhood Debunked**

The debunking of the myth of motherhood runs as a continuous thread in Anita Desai's novels. The mother in *Cry the Peacock* is acerbic, and too involved in social welfare activities to pay much attention to the travails of the children in the family. She is running creches, she is keeping track of her husband who is a freedom fighter and she has little time or patience to render help to the distraught Maya.

Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* is anything but a motherly soul. Alienated, trying to obliterate a lifetime of humiliation and desolation, she cannot succour poor Raka. The latter, ill and bewildered, comes from a shattered home, her father taking to drink and her mother inhabiting various nursing homes during her successive nervous breakdowns. There is no mothering to speak of, the mothers themselves are in need of nurture.

Sita in *Where Shall We Go this Summer ?* has hardly any idea of her own mother. Her mother, she is told when quite young, had run away to Benares, unable to stand her father. When she herself gives birth to four children, she is hardly ever supportive to her own children, baffled as she is by her own predicament as a woman, as a human being. Menaka her daughter and her sons grow independently, beside her, and need no nurturing for they seem to be competent enough to deal with the realities of their world.

The mother in *Clear Light of Day* is hardly ever there. Her ghostly presence fills the backstage as it were : the children here also grow exclusively with her active support. She is a sickly invalid, a diabetic who is propped alive by insuline shots and the little time and energy she has, are given to her bridge games at the Club. She is hardly aware of her children growing around her and it is left to an old aunt, Mira Masi, to be a friend and nurturer to the children, especially to Tara and Baba who need such care more than the others.

The mother in *Voices in the City* is a more complex figure. She is beautiful, rich and settled in an elegant home in Darjeeling ; she has power, latent power over everybody in her ken and does not hesitate to use it as and when she needs. She writes poetic letters, poetic but soulless, to her children. None of the children turn to her in the time of their need, none of them can associate her with mothering, succour or nurturance. There are hints given by Amla and Nirode of incest and infidelity, in the classic manner of Gertrude, Hamlet's mother. (p. 27).

Nirode labels her a she-cannible (p. 103). He tries to break out of her hold over him :

Tell her to go shove it up that old major of hers, all her stinking cheques. Tell her I want no share of it, no share of banks or finance or insurance and all the rest of her bleeding equipment. I am done with signing my name, believing my name or having a name. Tell her that. I am nameless. Tell her that. (p.139).

We see her total rejection of her surviving children. Monisha could not even conceive of asking her for help and marches alone to meet her fate. Amla rushes to her to be consoled, to be resurrected but is brusquely brushed aside (p. 255). Nirode is also pushed away so that she might stand alone and free : "He fell away and felt himself drained of blood and passion, he realised she did not want him anymore." (p. 251). Later, in a mystic vision he identifies her with Kali, the goddess of destruction. (p. 256). Having given birth to them, she also deals them their death. But above all it is as

the agent of rejection, of destruction that she is brought before us. This is a far cry from the idea of conventional motherhood, whose days of glory are numbered and its attraction to women diminished.

Anita Desai deglamourises motherhood. Born woman, one need not be born mother and young women in India do not have ideal mother figures with whom they can identify in contemporary fiction. One can lay the blame on the women's movement in India and elsewhere and also on younger novelists who have downgraded the image of the mother.

### **The Crazy Ones at Carignano**

The three women at Carignano, the lonely villa in Kasauli, are dubbed as crazy women by the people who come across them in that remote mountain valley. Nanda Kaul, the main protagonist in *Fire on the Mountain* is an observant study on the effects of old age on Indian woman. She, as Monisha wished to do so, has pared her life in its minimum necessities and lives in a lonely life up here, on the ridge, away from friends and relatives. She has the minimum of appurtenances to make her life go on, in the simplest manner. Open to the sky, the stars and the Himalayan air, she welcomes her solitude: "She wanted no one and nothing else." (p. 3).

She treasures her freedom, her privacy, glad her responsibilities towards her family are over, glad that she needs nobody now and nobody needs her. As a housewife, presiding over a large household, she has gone through the process that is so unsettling to a sensitive soul, that we see concretised in Sita in *Where Shall We Go this Summer?*

Now she has the height of old age and retirement to contemplate upon: "She had suffered from the variety, the disorder, the fluctuating and unpredictable excess. She has been glad when it was over. She had been glad to leave it all behind, in the plains, like a great heavy difficult book that she had read through and was not required to read again." (p. 30).

Into this idyllic solitude, comes Raka, her great grand

child, a strange, isolated creature whose own wish for solitude is as intense as the old woman's. Nanda, fearful of her solitude being eroded into, chooses to keep herself aloof, chooses to let Raka work her own way through the problems of a broken home, a drunk home, a drunk for a father and a mother recovering from nervous breakdowns, one after another. They work out the means by which they would live together in their mountain retreat.

Yet Nanda need not have worried. Raka makes no demands on her for she has no needs. She has mastered the technique of existing and yet appearing as non-existent. She explores the ravines where jackals prowl, she goes on unknown and mysterious expeditions on her own and she broods silently over the strange landscape and the fantastic and improbable things she sees. She lives her own secret life and ignores the people around her. She is the finished perfected model of what Nanda and the others like Monisha and Sita are merely brave but flawed experiments. Her rejection of Nanda, of the world around her, is natural and instructive coming with effortless ease whereas Nanda's is a planned, strained and wilful rejection: "If Nanda Kaul was a recluse out of vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation, her great-grand daughter was a recluse by nature, by instinct. She had not arrived at this condition by a long route of rejection and sacrifice—she was born to it, simply." (p. 48).

Nanda, an old woman, has plodded through life's miseries. Raka, the young girl, has seen the seamy side too, crammed into her memory within the space of a few years. She has seen her father

"stumbling and crashing through the curtains of night, his mouth opening to let out a flood of rotten stench beating at her mother with hammers and fists of abuse—harsh filthy abuse that made Raka cover under her bedclothes and wet the mattress in fright, feeling the stream of wine warm and weakening between her legs like a stream of blood and her mother lay down on the floor and shut her eyes and wept. (p. 71).

Her childhood has hardened her into a hard little core of soli-



tary self-sufficiency and now, a young girl up here in the mountains, recovering from a bout of typhoid her spirit is defiant enough to go chanting, "I don't care, I don't care, I don't care for anything." (p. 73). Scarred from birth, anything destructive, lawless, uncompromising and ruthless excites her. The conventional sweet smells and sounds of girlhood are ignored, she feels drawn by scenes of devastation and failure. The forest fires tingle her and she bursts from the shell of Carignano like a sharp, keen-edged explosive to set fire to the mountainside.

The third side of this high-strung triangle is completed by Ila Das, the genteel lady impoverished, seeking to relive the golden olden days in the company of Nanda, her friend from childhood. That Ila Das as a social worker makes little progress in a tradition bound community is an interesting sidelight here. The village priest exhorts the men folk against her and makes her life untenable. Endure she must for the sake of the salary she gets from her job, if not from any sense of vocation.

When she tries to conjure up a golden era of life and lovely relationships as existed in the past, Raka is plainly not interested and Nanda relives the rot in the core of her past as the Vice-Chancellor's wife. It is anguish on all sides. Ila Das on her way home is strangled and raped by an angry farmer for, she, as the social worker, had tried to prevent him from marrying off his seven year old daughter to an old man for a bit of land and two goats. (p. 143).

The past, the present and the future are all in ashes. Nanda who had tried to be isolated had, unknown to herself, warmed towards Raka. For her sake, she had tried to create a fantasy world from the past, a world of happy families, love, wealth, and good cheer. At one stroke Ila Das' death rips the curtain aside and reveals the hideous reality :

It was all a lie, all. She had lied to Raka, lied about everything .. Nor had her husband loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen—he had only done enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a lifelong

affair with Miss David, the mathematics mistress, whom he had not married because she was a Christian but whom he had loved, all his life loved. And her children—the children were all alien to her nature. She neither understood nor loved them. She did not live here alone by choice—she lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing. All those graces and glories with which she had tried to captivate Raka were only a fabrication. They helped her sleep at night, they were tranquilisers, pills. She had lied to Raka. And Ila had lied too, Ila, too, had lied, had tried. (p. 145).

It is of no use, this fabrication of a fantasy. The reality is hideous enough to force Raka to escape and seek her thrill, her way out by setting fire to mountainside. Ila dies living her fantasy while Nanda sees, like Monisha, how makeshift and senseless is the compromise between external and inner experiences. One is struck once again by the wanton waste of human potential.

### **Jellyfish Stranded on the Sand-bar**

Anita Desai's next novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* deals with the travails of Indian immigrants in England and does not contain any fullfledged portrayal of the Indian woman. Sarah who marries Adit and is caught in the painful cultural cross currents is an English girl. She reminds one of the foreign women in Jhabvala's novels trying hard to assimilate, to belong and becoming more of an alien than when they set out. Other women like Mala and Sarah's neighbours, the Sikh women, make their appearances but are too casually glimpsed to besit close scrutiny.

The persistent rivalry between marriage and self-fulfilment that is seen in the earlier novels is brought to a point of crisis in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Sita the protagonist is over forty, awaiting the birth of her fifth child; her experiences as housewife and mother accumulate one jarring note after another and she is in deep anguish. She realises that genuine happiness is not possible in her marital context, that hope rises only to be crushed in an insensitive and cruel setting, that her

husband and children are alien to her nature and her needs and that to preserve her sanity, she has to escape from her routine life in a Bombay apartment and flee to Manori, an island on the West Coast, where she had spent her childhood with her nationalist hero of a father.

There is no fully eventuated, adult love between two mature human beings in Desai's literary canon. There is erotic passion, immature longing, schizophrenic torment and suspicion ; there is at times Apollonic admiration or Dionysiac debauch. There is, however, no hope of creating conditions so that adult, responsible and creative love between the sexes can thrive. Sita, the protagonist here, realises in Kierkegaard's fashion that it is greater a misfortune not to realise the misfortune of being born a woman. She had placed herself in bondage to Raman and the children, she had channelled all her ambition and energy their way while she went parched herself. She tries to break away, and she flees to Manori in the middle of the monsoon, to regroup her bearings. She is termed mad, and entirely out of this world, to do so. (pp. 23, 38, 107, 113-14).

Like Maya and Monisha, Sita is also high strung with a heightened sensitivity and imagination that make her emotionally vulnerable. She sees the world around exulting in destruction. Her husband and her children thrive in a world where wanton and cruel destruction is the main element and where creation is merely a freak, a temporary and doomed occurrence. She goes back to the concerns of Maya in the earliest novel. She wonders whether she has gone insane, or the world around her. She loses all faith in femininity, all maternal belief in child birth. She queries whether child birth is an act of creation or a violent pain-wracked act that destroys what is safely contained in the womb by releasing it into a violent, murderous world. Each act of unthinking violence—her boys fighting a duel like their heroes in the films, Menaka wantonly ripping buds off a plant or shredding her paintings, the youngest, Karan, demolishing his toys with karate blows, Raman stolidly munching his breakfast while she battles with a popgun to frighten away the crows who are bent upon

feasting on a fallen eagle—each act being more horrible than the other makes her shrink into herself, frightens and appals her in its cruelty. The violent news in the newspapers, the endless fights in the block of flats, in the streets outside, sicken her and she longs to protect herself and her unborn child from them.

All the placid serenity, all the pleasure, sensual, emotional and Freudian, that are associated with pregnancy and parturition are absent and she is left with the overwhelming emotions of fright and disgust. Raman cannot understand the paranoiac show of fear, rage and revolt "of a woman now in her forties, greying, aging to behave with such a total lack of control." He stands silent, and blind in his disbelief. All that he can say, 'Don't be silly', 'Sita, don't behave like a fool', 'think of your condition', 'you've gone mad', all these expressions of his distaste towards her emotional outbursts, towards her 'proclivity to emotional drama' trigger further explosive outbursts on her part.

When she rebels against giving birth for the fifth time, she misses her point entirely. While she wants the miracle of not giving birth and thereby protecting her unborn child against a cruel environment, the Hindu in him looks down upon her as a freak of a woman who aims at aborting her foetus. She flees to the island— "... she was on the island, in order to achieve the miracle of not giving birth. Wasn't this Manori, the island of miracles? Her father had made it an island of magic once, worked miracles of a kind." (p. 20). Her behaviour is deemed strange whereas she seeks to escape 'the madness all around'. She bursts out: "Mad! You are quite mad. Kill the baby? It's all I want. I want [to keep it, don't you understand? ...I mean I want to keep it—I don't want it to be born." (p. 23).

The intensity of her care, of her need for nurturance makes her seek her childhood home as a place to be sane again. She had grown tired of the life of dull, tedium, of hopeless disappointment on the mainland. Having no longer the nerve or

the optimism to continue, she seeks her island refuge, safe from pursuit and capture by her family, away from the solidity and critical hubbub of life in Bombay.

On the island, from the vantage point of middle age, she tries to connect the changes, distortions and revelations between the present and the past. The pail of childhood and youthful perceptions press hard on her. Memories and vivid hints of incest, of lust and miracles associated with her father, elder sister and brother come crowding around to torment her vision further. There are no answers to her deep anguish. She feels like a jellyfish stranded on the sand-bar slowly suffocating, slowly breathing its last, unable to recede into the ocean of the past, and unable to survive on the sands of the present.

### The Courage to Say 'No'

A vision of unhappy but exemplary wives does not enrich our world. Simone de Beauvoir says: "Much more interesting are the insurgent females who have challenged this unjust society: a literature of protest can engender sincere and powerful works."<sup>15</sup> She goes on to cite the examples of George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters. Anita Desai joins this illustrious company as her female protagonists refuse to conform to the accepted patterns of male oriented, dominated and approved social behaviour. They are rebels, one and all, who faced with a choice between their conviction and conformity, unhesitatingly choose the former, though it plunges them into a great deal of suffering and social ostracisation. They are like Sita's favourite poet, Cavafy, whom she quotes at length (p. 24):

"He who refuses does not repent.  
Should he be asked again,  
He would say no again. And yet that no—  
The right no—crushes him for the rest of his life."

When her father died, she was stranded and alone; Raman, the son of her father's friend took charge of her and

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15. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 718.

as she states flatly, "Out of pity, out of lust, out of a sudden will for adventure, and because it was inevitable—married her." (p. 71). A girl who grew up alone, into an uncertain but sensitive and intelligent young woman, a girl whose mother had vanished, whose father surrounding himself with the aura of a national leader held himself beyond the pale of communication with his own children, a girl who lived a solitary haplazard life on a desolate rain spattered island is thrust into the bosom of a conventional placid family.

Here in her description of her husband's family :

She never got used to any one. When they lived, in the first years of their married lives, with his family in their age-rotted flat off Queens Road, she had vibrated and throbbed in revolt against their almost subhuman placidity, calmness and sluggishness. The more stolid and still and calm they were, the more she thrummed, as though frantic with fear that their subhumanity might swamp her. She behaved provocatively—it was there that she started smoking, a thing that had never been done in their household by any woman and even by men, only in secret and began to speak in sudden rushes of emotion as though flinging darts at their smooth unscarred faces. (p. 32).

The women of the family spent their time planning, cooking and eating meals. Coming from Manori, she finds this obsession with food and food alone too fantastic to be real. "But very soon the kitchen odours and kitchen sounds thickened and swelled till they became indubitably real, overpoweringly real. She took to smoking instead of eating, to staring about her in silence, to speaking provocatively; they did not often answer her provocative questions, nor did they complain of her to her husband as women in another household might have done, for they had a quite exceptional capacity to expand the household and accept even such an outrageous outsider and beyond that they did not stir themselves. They wished to be left in peace; to eat, to digest. "They are nothing, they are nothing", she stormed in her room, when suffocated by their vegetarian complacency, the stolidity of the well-fed...." (p. 33).

She shakes herself free of this elephantine existence; this

life with people she considers as animals with nothing but appetite, food, sex and money. Her life with Roman is a smaller but fiercer no better :

But living by themselves was little better. People continued to come and be unacceptable to her. She took their insularity and complacency as well as the aggression and violence of others as affronts upon her own living nerves. She spent almost all her time on the balcony, smoking, looking out at the sea. (p. 38).

Her husband cannot comprehend her boredom, her frustration with life. He exclaims: "Bored? Bored? What? What what?" She herself is frightened of the endless sea prosper ahead of her and searching for an escape route that would proclaim her to be alive and sensitive, she says a bold "no" to her life in Bombay and begins to travel. The reality of her life with her husband becomes oppressive. She seeks solace in the illusory world of her childhood and youth :

She saw that Island Utopia as a refuge, a protection. It would hold her safely within its arms, by magic. Then there would be the sea. It would wash the dream out of her, drown it. Perhaps the waves would fill the children too, the swimmers softer beings. (p. 47).

### The Great Betrayal

Her hopes are soon lived. The discrepancy between reality and aspiration once again plunges her into intense suffering. The Island holds no magic for her now, no magic worth to heal her wounds. The magic the Utopia held, she realises is a fraud. She had clung to a sample upon all problems in an attempt to escape from the given suffering social conditions. She had attempted, as Roman sarcastically calls it, an "immature conception in reverse". Now she faces the stark steps of female narcissism, false magic and betrayal by her own island, by her own life and him. She sees her life ahead of her as an end search, full of betrayals, weakness and compromises. She is bewildered by the confusion, the multitude of it all: "Life had no periods, no sequences. It simply revolved around, muddling and confusing, leading nowhere." (p. 112).

At the moment when Sita, despising herself, is ready to lapse wearily into a husband's care, walks in Raman, summoned slyly, secretively by Menaka, their daughter. Menaka, so competent, and self-contained is a interesting contrast to Sita. She deplores her mother's 'emotion exccesses', her extreme sensitivity to suffering. The episode of the crows recalls to us not only the pain and bewilderment of Sita but also the embarrassment she causes to her staid daughter. The myth of motherhood is jettisoned completely for there is no shared understanding or companionship between Sita and her children in spite of all the anguish she undergoes for their sake. In *Voices in the City* the mother abandons the children ; here we find the reverse side of the picture.

The pattern of betrayal is completed by the husband. Sita tells him : "Children only mean anxiety, concern, pessimism, not happiness. What other women call happiness is just—just sentimentality." (p. 107). Raman thinks she is inhuman to deny motherhood and sentiment. She, however, is nothing if not a painfully honest being who is willing to face issues, who baulks at effete sops offered to dam her sensitivity, who finds her husband on a different wavelength altogether. He could not travel with her mentally and emotionally. In order to stay whole, in order to remain sane, she has fled to the island. With him, she associates dull safe routine in quiet grey doses whereas she yearns for a higher, throbbing life of the consciousness. He accuses her of desertion, of running a way while she finds her act of escape, a way of confronting, of saying no to her treadmill of a life.

She recalls her futile search for a meaning, a purpose in in her life. She tells Raman about the lovers in the park, the lovers who seemed to have that shared holy communion of spirits denied to them both.<sup>16</sup> Raman, as usual, is unable

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16. "Lovers in the park" is one of the images of decay and destruction that surface again and again in Desai's fictive design. See "Studies in the Park", in *Games at Twilight* (New Delhi : Allied, 1978), p. 30. images are the cow drowned in the well, the stranded jellyfish, the deathly pall of moonlight, the melancholy music concert, the dust storm in summer, the cry of the peacock, the crumbling house and the weed choked, ill kept garden.



to partake in her leap of imagination. He sees life in simple stretches, life to be lived and continued, in all its businesses in all its dealings with people :

Menaka's admission to medical college gained, wife led to hospital, new child safely brought forth, the children reared, the factory seen to, a salary earned, a salary spent. There was courage, she admitted to herself in shame, in getting on with such matters from which she herself squirmed away, dodged and ran. It took courage. (p. 101).

Only, it is not her brand of courage. She is aware that it is a battle between his brand of courage and hers: "Or her cowardice and his. But a battle it would be." (p. 102). She tries to escape from duties and responsibilities, from dull order and deadly routine, from soulless life in the city to her unlivable island. She has the courage to protest against giving birth to a child in a cruel unsympathetic environment, totally unsuitable for a child. Her imagination offered the alternative of a life un-lived, a life bewitched on the island. But her courageous 'No' is obliterated in the face of harsh reality, her dream turns into an all-too brief illusion. Her distress at the tedium of a blank meaningless life does not bother him—he is hardly aware of the basic aspects of her emotional existence. There is a total lack of communication between husband and wife, between mother and children.

Defeated, humiliated and betrayed, she is forced to come back to Bombay, she is bent to conform. She has to prepare for the arrival of yet another child in their life of falsity, to pretence and performance ; she who is so sensitive to suffering all around her, has to gear herself to bear another newborn infant launch on its life with a scream. She sees in her mind's eye the gynaecological ward, with its impassive, bored nurses, bored by yet another woman's panic stricken labour, assisting her in childbirth, the birth she had wanted to avoid, the birth that she had run away from, in fright and disgust. She has to conform lest she be certified mad.

Added to the meaninglessness of life is the bitter pill of

compromise and alienation. She knows she would live her life, like her husband and her children, rigidly encased in their separate silences, "like larvae in stiff spun cocoons", with her occasional outbursts of emotion, causing distress to herself and embarrassment to the rest of the family. Her sojourn at Monari has, however, given her a new awareness. She realises now "What a farce marriage was, all human relationships." (p. 105).

### Plumbing the Depths of Time

Of her latest novel, *Clear Light of Day*, Anita Desai states :

My novel is set in Old Delhi and records the tremendous changes that a Hindu family goes through since 1947. Basically, my pre-occupation was with recording the passage of time : I was trying to write a four-dimensional piece on how a family's life moves backwards and forwards in a period of time. My novel is about time as a destroyer, as a preserver, and about what the bondage of time does to people. I have tried to tunnel under the mundane surface of domesticity.<sup>17</sup>

The novel centers around a house in Old Delhi and the two brothers and two sisters who grew up there. Tara the younger sister, at the start of the story, re-visits her family, in between her husband's foreign service postings. She is engulfed by the disturbing memories of her childhood and the atmosphere of surrealistic stasis that the old house generates. Years of Westernised and antiseptic living in different capital cities have not exercised these ghosts from a vividly remembered past from Tara's mind. By the time Tara's visit is over, she plumbs the darkest depth of the past, together with her elder sister Bimla or Bim. Together they traverse the road of anger, guilt, fear and remorse. All emotions are spent. There remains only a new awareness of the continuity of life, a life that marches along with time, destroyed and preserved by it, a life that is sustained by the old bonds of family life, luminous and engulfing like the light of a clear, bright day.

Desai's novel encompasses for more than the tormented

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17. Desai, "Tremendous Changes, Interview by Sunil Sethi," *India To-day*, (1-5 December 1980), p. 142.

lives of two sisters. "It evokes", as Meenakshi Mukherjee says, "a sense of time (the pre-partition riots, the turbulent months leading to the murder of Gandhi), a spirit of place (the brooding decadence of a house in Old Delhi), many moods, many echoes and shadows of different darkness, all conveyed in a charged language that is unmistakably hers in its intensity and sensuousness."<sup>18</sup> The brooding atmosphere, full of dark shadows, strange forebodings, lurking terrors and gnawing guilt from the past renders it, in the words of Sunil Sethi, with "the quality of an Ingmar Bergman movie or a Tantric rite, interpreted in terms of everyday life."<sup>19</sup>

Tara, tremulous, with a rush of emotions an insecurity that seeks constant shoring up, reminds one of Maya, the highly strung female protagonist in *Cry, the Peacock*. Here Tara's flights of fancy are kept somewhat in check by Bakul, her assertive diplomat of a husband and by the presence of her two almost grown-up daughters. But Tara is not at peace with herself. She comes to the old decaying house, trying to exorcise the ghosts of childhood and adolescence. The past bears down on her with the intensity of a half-remembered dream. She, like the author, tries to plumb memory's lane, to connect the past with the present, to inter-relate the changes, distortions and revelations that the two realities bring.

The house and its occupants are decaying slowly and steadily. In all these years that Tara has escaped and founded a family of her own, Bim, the brilliant but eccentric elder sister and Baba, the elf like but imbecile younger brother have never left the house. The house is a tomb in the great cemetery of Old Delhi which does not change, or renew itself. These are ghostly figures trapped in the past, decaying in the present. The complex centripetal pulls between the brothers and sisters cause tension within the family. Memories of insufficiency of guilt and betrayal intermingle in Tara's mind.

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18. Meenakshi Mukherjee, "Night and Day", review of *Clear Light of Day* in *The Hindustan Times* (8 December, 1980), p. 6.

19. Sunil Sethi, "Pieces of the Past," review of *Clear Light of Day* in *India Today* (1-5 December 1980), p. 143.

Images of decay and destruction surface constantly in her consciousness as she watches her sister, greying, bitter, grappling with dull students and her retarded brother, smooth, silent and white, locked in his lunatic world, constantly listening to the records of the forties.

Tara remembers the old well at the edge of the garden where the cow drowned and remained unsalvaged, the abortive picnic in the Lodhi Garden where Bim was attacked by the bees while she herself escaped ; her father putting a shot of insulin into her mother's arm making the child Tara feel that he is murdering her, the nightmarish vision of the dotty aunt tearing her clothes in alcoholic frenzy ; Raja the elder brother, so full of promise yet languishing in sick bed with tuberculosis, the decadent pomp of Hyder Ali, their neighbour with his plump silly daughter Benazir, the collusion of Raja and Bim against her and her insufferable sense of alienation at home and at school.

When challenged as to what she would like to be on growing up, she chooses to be a mother, much to the merriment of Raja and Bim. Yet she is the only one who escapes the pall of decay and death, that the old house casts on all, she is the only one who realises what she had set out to do, however, imperfect her model may be thereof. Here is the difference between the two sisters :

Bim, of course, worshipped Florence Nightingale along with Joan of Arc in her private pantheon of saints and goddesses and Tara did not tell her that she hoped never to have to do anything in the world, that she wanted only to hide under Aunt Mira's quilt or behind the shrubs in the garden and never be asked to come out and do anything, prove herself to be anything. (p. 126).

Her schooldays were dreary, out bringing the comfort and security that she yearned for : "Forced to go back to school, she accepted with a weak abandonment of hope that these grey, wretched days would stretch on forever, blighting her life with their creeping mildew." (p. 127).

The secret hopeless suffering of a diabetic invalid mother, who is hardly aware of the existence of the children, a father who divides his time between his club and his wife, this total absorption of the parents in each other to the exclusion of their offspring, adds to the grey chalk dust of life, the depth of despondency that the sensitive Tara feels. Added to this is their anxiety over the hopeless future of Baba, the mentally retarded kid brother. Bim is the natural leader, the Head Girl at school and Raja, the brilliant orator and poet in his; Tara timid and shy, trails behind constantly.

Her childhood fears, never assuaged, grow up along with her and she is a timid, young woman. She is conscious of the fact that she abandoned Bim not because of spite or retaliation but because of fear—"it was the spider fear that lurked at the centre of the web—world for Tara. Yet she did abandon Bim, it was true that she did." (p. 134). While Bim stays firmly against marriage; Tara sees no other alternative for escaping. Bim has the foresight to guard herself against marriage; she knows that it wouldn't be enough to hold her for the whole of her life: "Can't you think? I can think of hundreds of things to do instead. I won't marry." (p. 140): Bim sticks to her decision with spirit. "I shall work. I shall do things. I shall earn my own living and look after Mira-Masi and Baba and be independent." She has spirit and she has a profession, and she need fear no one in the world. Tara provides a contrast to her fierce independence, hedged in as she is, by her fear, and her insecurity.

For so many years Tara has tormented herself with having abandoned Bim, abandoned her to their old house and their imbecile brother. When she wants to ask her forgiveness for running away, from the bees that swarmed around them in Lodhi garden, leaving Bim to their mercy, it is symbolic of her asking forgiveness for the greater abandonment of Bim forever. She feels guilty breaking out, seeking fulfilment elsewhere while Bim stagnates and Raja too abdicates, responsibility running away to Hyderabad and Benazir, their former neighbour's daughter. At close of novel, Tara meets with not forgiveness and understanding but forgetfulness and incomprehension.

While Bim had forgotten the details of her guilt at the picnic site and cannot comprehend Tara's anguish at deserting her and marrying Bakul, Tara feels thankful that time had blurred not only the events of that bizarre picnic but also other grievances, other miseries. But nothing is completely obliterated.

Bim sees in Tara's desperation a reflection of her own despair. She reflects: "They were not so unlike. They were more alike than any other two people could be. They had to be, their hands were so deep in the same water, their faces reflected it together. 'Nothing is over,' she agreed. 'Ever', she accepted.

Tara seemed comforted to have Bim's corroboration. When Bim repeated 'Go, Tara' she went. At least they had agreed to a continuation." (p. 174).

Tara knows she would come back again and again to draw sustenance from Bim, from that old house. She needs it to wade through the mucky depths of years of sticky, secret, guilt, fear and insecurity.

### **Changed Perceptions**

us at the end of the story. As Bim goes about picking the pieces of the past and connecting them with the present, the house seems drenched in a deceptive calm. Yet underneath the polite murmurings, unspoken demands and exchanged glances, underneath all this dull, routine, domestic placidity, the imponderables remain. Hints of incest, unguarded recriminations and private traumas do not provide answers to Bim's tormented vision. Tara's visit rakes up dark memories of the distant past. She tries to piece together the complex strands of their lives into a jigsaw puzzle but time as destroyer and preserver usurps her task and she is borne along the tide, before she could pronounce an answer to her predicament. In the process her perceptions change. She is not the old Bim anymore; a new awareness, the awareness of time and its importance in human life has entered into her consciousness.

Meenakshi Mukherjee credits her with a change of heart, calmness, love and forgiveness towards the end of the novel. It is more a matter of changed perceptions the emergence of a new awareness than a cessation of torment or success in seeking a solution to mental anguish. She is as Janus-faced as ever-brisk, practical and acerbic on the one hand and ghostly and trapped in the past, on the other.

Staying on the same place, teaching in the old college and looking after those who hadn't run away—it seems to Tara at first that Bim is contented, having everything she wanted out of life. "She made what she wanted", says Bakul admiringly. (p. 158). Yet before long, Tara too is aware that Bim is no more and no less contented than herself. She is as angry, unhappy and upset as the others in the family; she, however, hides her anguish under a cloak of bursqueness.

For twenty years she has tormented herself with the rejection, the desertion of Raja, her elder brother, whom she had idealised with a near-incestuous passion. As Raja runs away to Hyder Ali in Hyderabad, leaving her in the crumbling house with an alcoholic aunt and a mentally retarded Baba, leaving her to juggle finances and carry on her bitterness feeds on her rejection and alienation. Raja, fat as a pasha in his father-

in-law's house, having married Benazir, and begetting five children, abdicates his responsibility towards Bim and Baba entirely. Bim treasures the pieces from their past, the poems he wrote, the memories of their idyllic childhood spent together.

She is, however, intelligent enough, unlike Tara, to guess correctly that the break with Raja is irrevocable. She chooses an independent life, brushes aside suitors like Dr. Biswas as if they were mosquitoes and guards her kernel of memories with the fervour of a zealot. How thoroughly she is misunderstood is brought home to her by the stolid Dr. Biswas' mistaken appraisal :

Now I understand why you do not wish to marry. You have dedicated your life to others—to your sick brother and to your aged aunt and your little brother who will be dependent on you all his life. You have sacrificed your own life for them. (p. 97).

Bim is being measured against conventional social matrices. The fact that she chooses to be independent, entirely out of her own volition, the fact that she is too spirited and intelligent to conform to married subservience, to accept an existence doled out in measured doses at someone else's mercy and behest, all these escape the conventional male hierarchy that surrounds her.

Ironically, it is her very unconventionality, her brusqueness, and her mental alertness that attract men to her ; all the while, she is oblivious of it and this renders her even more attractive, a prize to be conquered and cherished. Even staid practical Bakul feels drawn to her in a communion of equally free spirits. She has the masculine traits of ease, non-chalance and an unvarnished honest approach to life that is absent in the women around ; all these combine to make her a unique figure, admired and approved and yet intangible. mysterious. Tara is also aware of this admiration that she generates in men :

He (Bakul) had always admired Bim, even if she infuriated him often, and Tara sensed this admiration in the murky air. She sensed it with a small prick of



jealousy—a minute prick that simply reminded her how very close she was to Bakul, how entirely dependent on him for her own calm and happiness. (p. 150).

Bim, however, is still in the clutches of the ghosts from the past, for all her vaunted independence. She is racked by Raja's betrayal of herself, of the ancestral home, until, one terrible night, amidst the sheaf of memories revived by Tara's visit, a flash of intuitive knowledge lightens her load considerably. Raja, she realises, re-reading his poems and letters, stored in her study for the past twenty years, was no hero after all. He was only an effete romantic, a spokesman of Mughal decadence in crumbling Old Delhi. Over the years, her memory had played the trick of clothing him in a hero's mantle. She discovers that he was just mouthing Byron and Swinburne and Iqbal in a fever of vain romanticism (even his malady falls into the conventional romantic pattern) without any belief in them; he was a mere imitation, not the original. Being merely repetitive and banal, too weak to confront reality, he ran away, abdicating all responsibility. Part of the debris accumulated from the past is now cleared by Bim as her new awareness, her self-knowledge, crumples and discards the false romantic image of Raja. Raja would not matter to her anymore, not any more than the others in the family, people who have always pursued her, who have depended on her, and who have never let her be alone.

Her changed perceptions, her new awareness does not mean that she is out of the woods yet. Against the metaphors of decay, the crumbling old house, the decaying old city, the conflicts of the post-Independence era, she has to work her way out through the tapestry of jealousy, guilt, loneliness and betrayal that the foursome spell out. It is to her credit that she tries repeatedly to clear herself of the debris from the past, to organise herself into some sort of order, of life, of happiness. Her ordinary working life, her routine of teaching at college comes to be of great help in maintaining her sanity; her spirit and her profession help her to be a whole, sane being, against all odds. She reflects that Tara's visit has been a great strain on her emotions, constantly dragging her and pulling her apart and wearing her out.

While she worked, she felt a sharp fiery pining for college to re-open and her ordinary working life to be resumed. Then she would be able to end all this storm of emotion in which she had been dragged back and forth all summer as in a vast, warm ocean and return to what she did best, most efficiently, with least expense of spirit—the keeping to a schedule, the following of a time-table ; the application of the mind to facts, figures, rules and analyses. (p. 169).

### Frail Bark Upon the Waters

Bim is a finely etched, figure, standing way ahead of the other women in Desai's fictive world, illumined as she is by education and intelligence rather than by blood or tradition or other social niceties. In acknowledging herself as already an anachronism, by standing upon her own lonely resources to meet the discrepancies between dream and objective action, desire and fulfilment, hunted mystery and painful revelation, she performs the noblest duty of her breed and demonstrates its greatest asset—intelligence. She knows there are no answers to her tormented vision ; yet she strives to be whole, to be sane amidst all decay, destruction and death.

She is Desai's study of the intelligent woman's psyche, the woman who is aware of her potentialities and sense of direction. She rebels against the compulsion to succeed in conformity, she refuses to accept and compromise. She is aware of the incompatible sex roles inflicted upon women by society, of the determinants and threats to feminine identity. Burdened with responsibility, she is pinned down to narrow worlds of immobility and non-choice. In a society where no room is made for woman's sensibility or individuality, where every attempt at asserting her femininity and individuality leads to her being dubbed neurotic, where her male counterpart invariably fails in her traditional masculine role, the woman is made to feel she is a frail bark upon the waters of life.<sup>20</sup> Yet there is hope in women like Bim, who have the courage to withstand

the onslaughts of time and society, who lead their lives on their own terms who ask for the deeper morality of intelligent beings, who struggle for the loyalties of sensitive human relationships.

Bim has the intelligence to view privilege and duty in proper perspective, the intelligence to gaze steadily at history and not be overwhelmed by present fears and needs, and the intelligence to look farther into the future to see the ancient patterns of humanity, rise and fall and regroup. Through her, Desai makes us aware of thesis and antithesis, of the fact of sheer continuity, of reaping what we sow. History and change will continue with or without particular women, Bim or Tara. It is Bim who realises this, not Tara.

Through characters like Bim, Anita Desai pleads for better role models and support structures for women, especially women past their prime, over forty, when they perceive they are useless appendages, their primary jobs of bringing forth and rearing children having ended. The difficulties of bridging the gap between aspiration and reality, of juggling domesticity, love, children, career and emotional fulfilment leave women exhausted and often on the verge of mental crises. The existence of such a malaise, in India and elsewhere, posits out the tensions involved in contemporary living. Anita Desai's exploration of the disturbed psyche of the Indian woman ultimately leads to an emphasis on loneliness, the inevitable lot of human beings, men and women inclusive. Each being is driven back upon his own lonely resources eventually. Man or woman, prince or pauper, we realise, like Bim, the truth in Aurangzeb's last words :

Many were around me when I was born, but now I am going alone. I know not why I am or wherefore I came into the world.... Life is transient and the lost moment never comes back.... When I have lost hope in myself, how can I hope in others? Come what will, I have launched my frail bark upon the waters....<sup>21</sup>

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21. Aurangzeb's account of his last days, written to his son Prince A'zam is quoted at length in *Clear Light of Day*, p. 167.

## CHAPTER 7

# Ruth Prawer Jhabvala : White Woman's Burden

*Remembered she will bring remorse ;  
Seen she makes the mind unclear ;  
Touched she nearly drives one mad ;  
Why call such a creature dear ?*

—Bhartrihari (c. 600 A D.)<sup>1</sup>

*The women lived a life apart. They sat together in the inner courtyard and saw to the cooking and the children. This was right, this was as it should be.*

—Jhabvala,  
*The Nature of Passion*<sup>2</sup>

*Her pregnancy was a terrible embarrassment for him. Now everybody would know what he did with her at night in the dark, as quickly and guiltily as he had eaten the nuts and raisins.*

—Jhabvala,  
*The Householder*<sup>3</sup>

*As if India ever gave anyone anything ; Except of course germs and diseases. What did it give Etta after all these years, after taking her youth, her looks, her buoyancy and charm ?*

—Jhabvala,  
*A Backward Place*<sup>4</sup>

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1. Bhartrihari (c. 600 AD), 'Sringar Satakam, Verses on Sex', translated by A.L. Bhasham, *A Book of India*, ed. B.N. Pandey (New Delhi : William Collins, 1977), p. 190.
  2. Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, *The Nature of Passion* (New York : W.W Norton, 1956), p. 152. All further references are from this edition of the novel.
  3. Jhabvala, *The Householder* (1960 ; rpt. Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1980), p. 8. All further references are from this edition of the novel.
  4. Jhabvala, *A Backward Place* (1965, rpt. New Delhi : Hind, 1970), p. 107. All further references are from this edition of the novel.

"Say you're glad I take all things away from you and do what I like and how I like with you." After a longish silence Lee said yes.

—Jhabvala,  
*A New Dominion*<sup>5</sup>

I have lived in India for most of my adult life. My husband is Indian and so are my children. I am not, and less so every year. However, I must admit that I am no longer interested in India. What I am interested in now is myself in India....

—Jhabvala,  
'Living in India', *London Magazine*<sup>6</sup>

My quarrel is that Mr. Naipaul is so often uninvolved and unconcerned. He writes exclusively from the point of view of his own dilemma, his temperamental alienation from his mixed background, his choice and his escape. That temperament is not universal, not even widely distributed, that choice is not open to all, the escape for most is not from the community but into it. To forget this is to be wholly subjective, wholly self-righteous, to thing first and last of one's own expectations, one's own extreme discomfort.

—Nissim Ezekiel,  
'Naipaul's India and Mine'  
*New Writing in India*<sup>7</sup>

Ruth Praver Jhabvala, variously described as 'an inside-outsider' and 'outside-insider'<sup>8</sup> stands apart from the other writers in this study. The advantages and disadvantages of her literary situation are peculiar to her and they stem from her being a European lady of Polish-German-Jewish origin brought up and educated in England, who lived in India with her Parsi husband and wrote about India. She has given new, literary currency to the old doctrine that India makes extra-

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5. Jhabvala, *A New Dominion* (1972 : rpt. London : Quarter Books, 1976), p. 107.
  6. Jhabvala, "Living in India", *London Magazine* (September, 1970), p. 41.
  7. Nissim Ezekiel, "Naipaul's India and Mine" *New Writing in India*, ed. Adil Jussawalla (Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1977), p. 74.
  8. Vasant A. Shahane, "An Artist's Experience of India : R.P. Jhabvala's fiction" in *English and India*, eds. M. Manuel and K. Ayyappa Paniker (Bombay : Macmillan, 1978), p. 32.

ordinary and irreconcilable demands on a European, especially on a white woman. Faced with the choice of succumbing and breaking down in the awfulness that is India or seeking survival by withdrawal and flight, she has chosen to quit India after twenty-five years of living there; she now lives in New York, and looks back, perhaps, on her years in India not as a transplanted European life but as a passage through that country.

### The European Eye

While she is lauded for being objective, unemotionally detached, ironic and often satirical, one is also aware of the limitations imposed upon her work by a fixed European eye.<sup>1</sup> She writes from the viewpoint of a European and for readers whom she expects to be a Westerner, too, is not allowed to forget this cardinal fact. She is constantly aware of her Western values, of her Western readers and this has affected profoundly the technique and the content of her work. She states: "When one writes about India as a European and in English, as I do, inevitably one writes not for Indians but for Western readers."<sup>2</sup>

There are other writers like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, G.V. Desani and Santha Rama Rau who also have to straddle two cultures simultaneously. But unlike her, they go back to their grassroots in India frequently and with ease. Jhabvala remains consistently European, uninvolved, unconcerned. While this detached outlook promotes irony and satire in her work, it cannot be forgotten that she writes exclusively from the point of view of her own dilemma, of her own personal anguish as a white European woman, caught in a mixed marriage, in a tropical country, unable to compromise, unable to forget her own culture, wholly subjective, self-righteous, thinking constantly of her own choice, escape, expectations, discomfort and failure: such an attitude provides for fitful glimpses in her novels of the vision of Indian womanhood and these are fatally compromised or flawed. Under such circumstances, to get an accurate picture of what it means to be a contemporary Indian woman, one has to turn elsewhere.

Her non-involvement and detachment have made her a perpetual alien like Peggy in her short story *The Aliens*: "Oh I can't tell you how fed up I am with it all and how awful it is and the heat and everyone shouting all the time and they are all so coarse!"<sup>11</sup> Peggy is up against the coarse manners and crude ways of behaviour in a newly rich Punjabi merchant family. Yet she, unlike Jhabvala, though feeling 'alien' and left out, tries hard to 'live and let live', in her Indian husband's family.

Jhabvala usually writes about the rising commercial bourgeoisie from North India, mainly in and around Delhi and her characters, chosen from the social class and setting she knows best, are by no means sophisticated. She views the affairs of an Indian middle class or upper class family as if it were a game, a comedy of the unfettered human consciousness. While she avoids the pitfalls of sentimentality or superficial

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11. Jhabvala, 'The Aliens', *Like Birds, Like Fishes* (London: John Murray, 1963), p. 99

involvement, she also limits her vision. She is illustrative of the fact that living in India does not necessarily mean living the Indian life or sharing the Indian vision of life.

The East-West encounter is part of the Indian experience as a legacy from her colonial past and is not exclusive to Jhabvala. Such an encounter implies accommodation to the weight and persuasive power of a cultural tradition considerably old, and uniquely combining the precision of philosophy with the passion of literature. The tyrannies and potential of such a culture when brought into relationship with other Western structures which challenge them and which have created their own systems of tyranny and potential leads one to either suffer and belong or to flee and be cast adrift. Jhabvala chooses the latter.

The Indian returned from England or the English man/woman trying to settle down in India is a standard figure in modern Indian fiction. The process of adjusting to a foreign rhythm of life, of living through estrangement, alienation and misunderstanding is painful enough and is carried to its logical deeper levels of intensity by novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao. The woman in such a context is on a quest of her identity, of her validity as a human being. Jhabvala skirts the issue of such patterns of identity. What she chooses to deal with are collisions of behaviour, series of cross talk interplay, and in-joking; looking down upon her characters with an amused, ironic tolerance. The Indian female sensibility in all its serenity and strength cannot be adequately described in novels of chit-chat dealing with the social comedy of manners nor in works transmuting one particular Westerner's personal anguish as the ineluctable element of the human condition for all Westerners, generally.

Since she avoids the risk of full involvement, she deals with a depersonalised India; her women are routine figures, though they are more animated than the row of effete, romantic, vain, obsequious, fawning, flattering brown men, the poor babus, cut off from their tradition and foreign to newer Western values of



thought and action. None of the women characters have the inwardness of Raja Rao's women, the comic but deceptive integrity of R.K. Narayan's heroines nor the self-imposed laceration of the dispossessed that we see in Kamala Markandaya nor the vivid defiant assertion of the self against the encroaching negation, of individuality, that we see embodied in Anita Desai's characters.

The meaningful relationship between man and woman is absent. India seems a prison, each race enslaved by its own respective ethos. The races maintain their separateness to maintain order and the Hindus, as a people, get scant sympathy and consideration.<sup>12</sup> Miscegenation leads to personal and social turmoil and mixed marriages are viewed with unsympathetic eyes. Olivia and the Nawab Gulab and Esmond, Lee and the Swami are examples to the point. The foreigners set up their own way of life in India and the reader and the author remain as successfully outside the Indian vision of life as Esmond and Etta are. Being saturated with a sense of 'alienness', of Western values, it is difficult to convey or comprehend the inwardness of Indians.

The result is an art that is highly skilled but unavoidably limited. There are no larger than life figures, men or women, striding into confrontation and growth too is precluded as deeper investigation is avoided.

Within their narrow compass, her novels are skillful affairs. She has a marvelous ear for the rhythms of Indian speech and

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12. Alan J. Greenberger, *The British Image of India* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 75. He states: "As long as both the races accept this principle (i.e., of separateness), there is no trouble. The English can then be good mothers and fathers to their Asiatic babies for the obligations and rights are clear. The result of this arrangement is a harmonious relationship. If it is unequal, it is in the natures of things that it should be so. After all, children are children and not small adults." The Europeans in *Esmond in India*, *A Backward Place* and *Heat and Dust* are no longer confident of enveloping the whole world and they find it preferable to insulate themselves from the problems of India by withdrawal or flight.

an observant eye for the modes of behaviour in an adopted culture. However, a critic like Balachandra Rajan faults her on many points :

But the cast is limited, the tonal range is restricted and the joint effect of her many books is unavoidably one of accumulation rather than growth. Even if we confine ourselves to the foreigners and their dealings with India, there are opportunities to move deeper which Mrs. Jhabvala avoids.<sup>13</sup>

Her fiction does not encompass the ambiguities, the tensions and the resolutions of the deeper life of the woman, Indian or Western, in the Indian context, to be declared in an act of literature.

### **Memsahib or Crank**

The Indianness of Jhabvala, like that of other European writers on India has been often queried. That Jhabvala writes in India as a European is a relevant fact. The question to be asked is not whether Indianness is possible in a European writer like Jhabvala but what range of literary possibilities are open to an author in India, writing about India and how he/she uses them with English as the instrument of expression.

The Indianness of a writer becomes a secondary matter in a writer who, though different by birth and cultural and social heritage, is able to transcend these differences and reconcile his vision of the Indian character, of the Indian sensibility with the consciousness of the universal man, with the universals in human passion and reason rather than restricting himself to one specific category either Indian or European. V.A. Shahane states and resolves this problem :

National quintessence is as important a source of literary art as universal human passion common to all mankind. It is, of course, true that Indian creative writing has to be judged primarily as art and only secon-

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13. B. Rajan, 'India', *Literatures of the World in English*, ed. Bruce King (London : Routledge Kegan and Paul, 1974), p. 80.

darly as an expression of social ethic or values. However, the ethic or values are inextricably linked up with the aesthetic form of the great art of literature and should not be considered in isolation. The Indianness of the Indian art of fiction in English is, therefore, very much a part of that art itself.<sup>14</sup>

It is to her credit that Jhabvala with her complex alien background, trains a keen, observant eye on the conflicting human relationships in Indian society especially difficult for a foreigner as it has always been an in-group society, obscure and deep enough to elude casual investigation. She is most sincere and at her best in revealing her new awareness of India, her initial responses to the phenomenon that is India as reflected in her early novels. *To Whom See Will*, *The Nature of Passion* and *The Householder* are the best examples of her craft at this stage in her literary life. They are gentle comedies embodying the light, unfettered consciousness, seldom delving deeper than the ordinary, the quotidian; yet they contain flashes of human understanding and kindred spirit. The author shows herself open to being moulded by her experience of life in India. These early novels contain almost wholly an Indian cast of characters and only Indian culture contrasts. The author exhibits her enthusiasm and awareness of new modes of living, different from what she has been used to hitherto.

This period of sunshine and gentle comedy, however, is not enduring. There is a growth in the process of alienation with the passage of time and with it a deeper awareness of her predicament as a European woman in India, 'a bird in a gilded cage'. She is now more aware of the erosion wrought on the European sensibility by Indian climate and Indian modes of living. She brings a sense of her personal anguish and mental turmoil in her novels belonging to this period. Marital dissonance amidst East-West conflicts is portrayed sharply in novels like *Esmond in India*, *Get Ready for Battle* and *A Backward Place*.

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14. V.A. Shahane, *Ruth Praver Jhabvala* (New Delhi : Arnold Heinemann, 1976), p. 17.

With the last two novels, *A New Dominion* and *Heat and Dust*, [the process of withdrawal is completed. Everything falls apart. All relationships, whether Indian or Indo-European, whither and die, lead us nowhere and there is nothing but endless ennui. Her swing away from India, from everything Indian, from what she labels 'the richest soil for disillusionment', is unsatisfyingly one sided and ambiguous. Her initial excessive, unreflecting, un-controlled delight in India, her willing but unnatural suspension of European sensibility and of rational judgment, the same that she emphasises so much later have now led to the inevitable recoil and revulsion from India. She had discussed the surrender of her personality, the ceasing of her efforts to be defiant and European. "Of course, this can't go on indefinitely and in the end I'm bound to lose—if only at the point where my ashes are immersed in the Ganges to the accompaniment of Vedic hymns, and then who will say that I have not truly merged with India?"<sup>15</sup>

Now she sets up Europe and India in a constant state of futile antinomy. The issue of surrender of personality is now replaced by the struggle "to keep my own personality and not become drowned in India, to remain European"<sup>16</sup> India has become noxious, harmful, a sort of White Woman's Burden for her. She feels she can never become Indian, that her stay in India threatens her Europeanness, her personality. This personal dilemma is transposed as a generalisation, as the principal problem of the European characters in her novels. They, like their creator, have to choose between staying on and suffering (like Etta, Olivia and Lee) or else flee towards greener pastures abroad (like Betty, Esmond and Raymond), Both ways India and Indians are to be blamed.

R.F. Isar, the distinguished journalist, makes a valid attack on Jhabvala's contentions :

15. Jhabvala, 'Living in India', *London Magazine* (September, 1970), p. 51.

16. R.F. Isar, 'Is India Just Heat and Dust?', *The Hindusthan Times* (November 8, 1980), p. 5.

These formulations may have been all right for her personally but seem to me all wrong as generalisations. India does not force a white woman to become either memsahib or crank; it may well bring out either if the potential was there on arrival. Nor is it the only tropical country to make an assault on European senses. Some people get old-maidish reactions and run indoors to hide but most seem to get along quite well. Nobody in a country whose essence is a rich plurality really asks you to be other than your own genuine self. It is only some foreigners who think they have to undergo a kind of bilious sea-change mostly by awkward compliance with externals.<sup>17</sup>

### Gentle Comedy of the Unfettered Consciousness

Jhabvala's early novels, *To Whom She Will* and *The Nature of Passion* are gentle comedies dealing with plucky little women, making their way in warm receptive world. They are straightforward accounts of the free unfettered consciousness of the young women who do not strive to achieve, to turn the world over but who are content with finding their niche of fulfilment, their reconciliation with life in marriages arranged by the elders in the family. Their wills are not thwarted brutally, they are not crushed by reality, they do not face discrimination or sexism but rather an excess of love from those around them.

It is an amiable world in which Jhabvala allows her heroines, Amrita and Nimmi, to be as naïve and foolish as they wish. The narrative rhythm is peaceful and leisurely and there are no snap judgments or condemnations as these girls try and find out what life is all about. Near the end she lets them settle down into peaceful matrimony and they realise that their happiness lies in predictable domesticity. This idyllic conclusion seems inevitable given the benign elders, the rising coffers of the newly rich merchant class, and the young cinderellas who turn out finally to be good, obedient, meek and submissive to kindly parental authority. The chief point in in these two early novels seems to be fun.

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17. Isar, p. 5.

The male counterparts, Hari Krishna Sen Gupta, Kuku and Pheroze are inferior in stature when compared to these youthful and enthusiastic young women. The male is stereotyped as the effete romantic fool, a man who dreams and who nurses grievances, a man who talks a lot and achieves little, a sort of drone who ekes out a living by clinging on to the nourishing and sustenance doled out to him by the more intelligent and vivacious female. The male suitors, when cast aside, do not stalk off and cause trouble. They let go gracefully and the woman starts a new life of married felicity with the partner, approved or chosen by her elders in the family. There is, of course, enough money in the background to keep everybody in comfort.

*To Whom She Will* derives its title from the story in *The Panchatantra* where the sage warns against keeping a daughter unmarried for too long as then "she gives herself to whom she will." Amrita tries to give herself to whom she will but she is thwarted. Her lover, Hari, is tied down in matrimony with Sushila Anand to preclude the possibilities of free love and fighting for freedom of choice and matrimony. While Hari the first in a series of weak willed, tall-talking, supercilious, passive, pseudo-romantic male protagonists, milling around idly in coffee houses, that we see frequently in Jhabvala's fictive world, Amrita is no strong woman either. She is immature with adolescent swings of sentiment, does not will as much as expected, and reconciles herself, all too readily, to Hari marrying Sushila and herself being tied with Krishna Sen Gupta, her grandfather's choice. Hari and Amrita marry finally, not for love, but for preserving the group values of family, community and religion. That marriage is but a social compromise in Hindu society is reinforced here, though in a comic vein.

When Hari protests feebly to his family that love is not a game, that he is in love with Amrita, that he cannot marry Sushila, his sister's husband brushes aside his love as adolescent and ineffective and events prove the elder to be right. Love, Hari is told, "is only a game and we all play it. After marriage

you will forget and you will laugh at yourself for taking it seriously."<sup>18</sup>

Hari is not certain of anything in life. His uncertainty, instability and waywardness are contrasted sharply with Amrita who tries her best to bring him around so as to meet the approval of her family. Her anglicised aristocratic family disapproves of the crudity of Hari and his relatives and her grandfather feels that Hari can never belong to the intellectual and sophisticated elite. Calf love being what it is, Amrita declares to Hari: "What does my family matter? You know I would give up everyone and everything for you. Nothing matters. Only you." (p. 29)

Hari tells her that he worships her as a goddess, that "every moment of the day I think of her, she is the nightingale of my heart, the stars of my eyes, the juice of my liver, tell her that." (p. 145) When Krishna, the one sober, and hence, freak character in a setting of frothy ineffectual beings, forces the issue, Hari is conscious of succumbing to family pressure. He yields to marrying Sushila, who is eminently suitable, coming from the same community. His love for Amrita is proved to be nothing more than superficial adolescent enthusiasm. He assents readily when his sister tells him: "You and Sushila. We think it is best for you she will give you happiness." (p. 115) Amrita fades away and at the auspicious hour, he goes around the sacred fire with Sushila and is married to her, in accordance with the wishes of the elders in the two families.

Amrita too is not genuine enough in her non-conformist attitude. She receives the letter in which Krishna, the paying guest in her home, declares his affection for her in a Darcy-like manner. She is sensible enough to forego romantic illusions of flight with the weak ineffectual Hari and plight her troth with the older, sedate Krishna. While the disparity between her

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18. R.P. Jhabvala, *To Whom She Will* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1955). All further references are from this edition of the novel.

aspiration and reality given enough room for the author's exploration of the comic possibilities inherent in the incongruities of the situation, it is also indicative of how the modern young woman in India is not really so 'mod' after all; in the slow but gradual transition of a tradition-bound society, the woman is often restrained by the forces of conventions and Jhabvala's women do not have the strength of will to transcend such restrictions.

Amrita's love for Hari is transient, and pseudo-romantic, with all the sound effects of a stacy radioplay at All India Radio where they work as announcers. It does not engage her consciousness at a deeper level; hence she reconciles herself to Hari marrying Sushila and her marrying Krishna, all too readily. While Jhabvala skillfully exploits the comic possibilities in social compromise, it is a sad commentary on the 'modern' young Indian woman.

### **An Amiable Tale**

*The Nature of Passion* has been looked at as a comedy of social manners and morals and also as a family chronicle. Here, it is treated as a study of the growth in consciousness of its young female protagonist, Nimmi who, endowed with good looks, intelligence, loving family and plenty of money, has it, seems, the wonderful chance of 'getting it all in'. Where her passion leads her to and how she shapes her life are interesting queries, explored in an ironic vein. The 'rajas' (passion) aspect of human endeavour is emphasised in the novel.<sup>19</sup>

In the typical joint family cauldron belonging to Lalaji, the pater families, we find his wife, sister, three sons, three daughters, sons-in-law, daughters-in-law and not to forget the youngest, Nimmi, jostling against one another, knowing each other's good and bad points, all of them stewing in one another's juices. Only Chandra, the England-returned second son with his government job and his 'different' wife, Kantha, tries his hand at a nuclear family. It proves to be equally

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19. Note that Jhabvala quotes the Gita and Radhakrishnan in her preface to *The Nature of Passion*.



pressurised both by his wife and the extended tentacles of his father's domain.

The lure of money is a factor which binds them altogether. Kantha, who professes to be independent, educated, anglicised and different from the other members of the family is also aware of the power of money and is equally acquisitive. While maintaining a facade of disdain and alienation from her money-mad and mercantile in-laws, she, nevertheless, manipulates them to suit her purposes and liberally helps herself with Lalaji's cash as and when the need arises. She and her husband consider themselves intellectual but their dependence on Lalaji's financial help is illustrative of the contradictions in Indian society where Gandhian tenets jostle side by side with kingly aspirations.

Lalaji rules over this acquisitive domain with an iron hand. The women are relegated to the women's quarter where they lead separate subservient lives and this is the norm in his society. Here is a vivid picture that the woman can expect in such a patriarchal setting :

Demure daughters-in-law, stern mothers-in-law, and widowed aunts, all pounding spices, sifting rice, scolding servants, washing babies; the stone jars or rice and lentils, the vat of boiling milk, the barbecue, the pump in the courtyard, quarrels and recriminations and occasional songs, nostalgic peasant song or plaintive hymns winding round and ceaseless kitchen noises—these constituted the necessary if unconsidered background to a man's life (p. 152).

The women around Lalaji, live by a different set of duties. Time and again we are told a daughter is a daughter to be given away, that Kalidasa speaks of her as a loan that must be returned when she goes to her husband's house, that "every girl has to be married, what else is there" (p. 212), that education is but a plaything to a woman (p. 152), and that 'only by fulfilling her duty by her husband and his family will a girl attain to goodness and beauty in the sight of God. (p. 176). Om, the eldest brother, tells us what is in store for his own daughter :

When she is seven I will find a good husband and betroth her. She has to learn from her mother and her aunts to make chapatis and mango pickle. When she has learnt that well and also knows to manage servants and children, she can go to her husband's house and be a credit to us there. (p. 19).

This is about the newborn baby who is still in the maternity clinic with her mother, Shantha !

Amidst this hollow moneyed set up with its attendant emotional dessication, Lalaji's love for his youngest daughter Nimmi, comes in as a breath of fresh air. Lalaji is enterprising vigorous and cheerful : though conforming to the old ways and beliefs in Indian social living, he makes the necessary adjustments to accommodate the demands of his business dealings and his clamorous relatives. He who treats all women as mere possessions, even his wife of forty years, has a soft corner for his youngest who is his treasure, his pride, his finest achievement. "Would there ever be anyone good enough for her ? A prince, he thought, a prince I'll get for her." (pp. 14-15)

He knows it is "the woman's fate to leave the house of her father and go to a husband's house to bear his children, to look to the comforts of his family." In his moneyed world he could afford to pick and choose, to wait for the right time and opportunity. He knows, though money may ease her path, she would have to face the challenges of life in another family. A father's love for his daughter is deftly brought out by the author :

That he should lose her, give her away to a husband's house, not hear anymore her voice ringing through his home ! And see her curled up on the divan eating a banana like a queen, young and graceful, dainty and fresh, his Nimmi ! When he thought of home, he thought of her; she filled his house and his thoughts like a fragrance. To come home, to think of home and to find that fragrance missing this was what was intolerable to home. (p. 169)

That Nimmi has to be married off is the only black cloud in an otherwise amiable and prosperous world, headed by Lalaji. "All men wish in their prayers for wealth and for beautiful daughters. And yet, though Lalaji, there is great sorrow both in wealth and in beautiful daughters, since the one has to be kept up and the other given away." (p. 245).

### Kisses in the Moonlight

Nimmi is a sprightlier and more attractive young woman than Amrita. She is eager to savour all that life has to offer around her; she is still naive and innocent of the sorrows that creep into the lives of other heroines of *Jashnala*. *Shakuntala* in *Arundhati* in *India* is her nearest approximation though we leave Nimmi rather early, at the threshold of married life, we can safely conjecture that she would not be led blindly by passion as *Shakuntala* is led downwards. Nimmi's romantic flights of fancy are ultimately leavened with a touch of sturdy shrewdness of her father.

Nimmi is delighted in that she is an original who stands out and makes a conspicuous effort to stand apart. She goes to college, makes new friends, is aware of differences in class and caste. While her close friends come from old aristocratic families around Delhi, she is aware that "she is only the daughter of a newly rich Punjabi contractor. But she was charming and pretty and well-mannered so that she had soon managed to make them forget her defective family background." (p. 47).

She views the women in her own family critically: "How fat they all are!" she thought, with disdain, "and how fat they are, thin and dry and meagre like Phuphi!... And what bad manners they all have!...", she thought looking at her female relations. (p. 34). She has no models to emulate in her own family. Her mother is an old woman of the old order who believes a woman must not be seen except when serving the members of her family (p. 105), that a woman loses status, caste and salvation by undecorous behaviour. She becomes when Nimmi cuts her hair short; she is scandalised when she

earns Nimmi has been going around with a Parsi boyfriend and in all her old world strictures on Nimmi she is joined by Phuphiji. She is instrumental in needling Lalaji to fix Nimmi's marriage at the earliest opportunity.

Nimmi dismisses her eldest sister Rani as too vulgar, overloaded with jewellery, pompous and in poor taste. Her brother Om's wife, Shantha, is still, fat and placid. She gives birth to a child every year of her married life, is the traditional picture of a demure daughter-in-law and wife. She accepts Om's infidelity in a matter-of-fact way : "But she accepted them (the dancing girls) because everyone's husband went to such bad women. It was just something a wife had to pretend she did not know about." (p. 177). Her very placidity, her acceptance, irritates her husband Om and he strays further.

Nimmi's other sister Usha, already betrothed and awaiting her marriage shortly, is another woman who makes Nimmi revolt. Usha never gives a thought to the higher issues involved in marriage. Like every other woman in the family, she just accepted the fact that she was to be married off soon. She fails repeatedly at school and in college because she has simply no ideas of her own. She blindly obeys whatever her mother and aunt tell her. Nimmi is against that Usha is eager to get married to a man whom she hardly knows. "Afterwards there will be plenty of time to know him" is her placid reply. (p. 212).

Her view of what is best in life is narrow indeed : "There was nothing in life except bearing babies and looking after them and sitting in the women's quarters amid servants and the smell of cooking ; nothing except perhaps for a gentle lovely love for one's husband which made the babies come." (p. 216). Nimmi has no respect for her. She is contemptuous of the women who do not come out of their quarter, who do not know 'what life is', for instance "to be kissed by Pheroze Batliwala at Kutb in the moonlight." (p. 215).

Nimmi rebels against the family code. In her rebellion, she is assisted quietly by her doting father, who believes that the

rules applied "to all the daughters anyone had ever had : but no one had ever had a daughter like his Nimmi." (p. 153). When Om forbids her from talking freely to menfolk, at home she is infuriated : "I am not in Purdah !" (p. 101). She watches her weight, observes carefully that which makes for elegance in sophisticated society and takes delight in her college education. We see her trying to find out the difference between sensual and sensuous in her dictionary. She, we suspect, goes for Pheroze Batliwala more for the thrill of having a boy-friend like everybody else at college than for any genuinely felt emotion. She cuts her hair short because it is fashionable to do so, much against the strictures of her old-fashioned family. Kantha, ever-ready to criticize her husband's side of the family, grants that she is not clumsy, that there is some strength and a great deal of charm in her. (p. 98). Nimmi, on her part, acts the gracious party-goer and proffers to love the sherry offered though it "tasted like petrol". (p. 99) Defying convention and gossip, she goes to a selective night club with Pheroze, to see and to be seen.

Her love for Pheroze is treated throughout in a comic vein. Pheroze is one more effete pseudo-romantic young man, spawning on relatives, a figure we meet again and again in Jhabvala's fiction. All that he is conscious is whether his mother would approve of his behaviour. His kissing Nimmi in moonlight at the Kutb is portrayed in all its ironic splendour. While Nimmi's initial reaction is to laugh, his is funnier still : "What would my mother say if she knew I was kissing a girl who is not a Parsi ?" Then the author adds another ironic comment : "He had kissed several girls in the course of his career and this had always been his first thought." (p. 140)

As for Nimmi, she finds reality to be far different from fantasy. Her first kiss is nothing to wax eloquent about but it grows on her : "It was only on the way home while he told her about the carburattor of his car that she got really excited about having been kissed." (p. 141) She is illustrative of the French maxim that most people would not fall in love if they had not read or heard about it. Her love, adolescent, immature, and transient though it be, is surprisingly free of the engulfing,

stifling atmosphere of guilt and shame that we see predominantly portrayed in the later novels. She is too naive and innocent to feel, as yet, the shackles of guilt and shame in sex, traditionally imposed on Indian men and women.

Nimmi is aware that there should be more to love than laconic kissing in the moonlight. She is self-critical and she analyses her feelings for Pheroze with unconscious irony :

It was strange, Nimmi thought, but when she was away from Pheroze, she was more excited about him : The kiss was a case in point : for when he had actually been there, kissing her, her sole reaction had been one of amusement. But afterwards she could not keep her thought away from it and then it became romantic and thrilling. Perhaps it only became real, fully experienced with all the correct accompanying emotions, in the telling of it. (p. 183).

### **It is a Rich Man's World**

Nimmi is not allowed to dwell in her fantasy world too long. The family, alerted about her, closes its ranks. Lalaji bows to the pressure within his family :

If a girl was seen out in public places with a young man and worse, much worse with a man from a different community, her reputation would suffer and this would make it very difficult to find a suitable husband for her. So the only thing to do when there was a threat to the reputation was to find a husband quickly, at once, before the canker spread. (p. 229).

He is a rich man and he has no difficulty in fixing up, 'booking' as the punjabis describe it, Kuku, the vapid young man with the pink scarf who follows Nimmi about the town. Kuku, however, happens to belong to her community and he is also the scion of the director of Happy Hindusthan Company. It is money, money everywhere, a rich man's world.

Nimmi, to her credit, does not agree without a twinge of

conscious. She is puzzled at Pheroze letting her down : It was galling to hear that all he had sent her to satisfy her hopes were his congratulations. Men kissed only if they were in love and if he was in love, why should he give her up so readily ?" (p. 249) In her first flush of disappointment in Pheroze, she thinks of running away and choosing a career like that of a film star or a teacher. But being Lalaji's daughter, the practicalities assert themselves and she sees in a clear light the binding family relationships :

Perhaps until now she had not fully understood herself how much, how completely, she belonged to her family. The independence on which she had prided herself, her differentness from the other women in her family, were only an illusion. In reality her position was no different from Usha's and ultimately from Shantha's (p. 253).

Enough money in the family smooths things for her. She is to be married into a rich family and her husband-to-be admires her for her sophistication, her 'differentness' from their usual crowd. It is arranged that the two should get together in an informal picnic, in deference to the modern times, before marriage, to be seen and to be approved. Nimmi reconciles herself with the thought that this is "as good as having a proposal of marriage, almost as good as choosing one's own husband."

Life has given her every advantage one can think of. She dismisses Pheroze and running away for love of him and career thoughts in a jiffy and looks forward to her new life with Kuku. She is realistic enough to state :

Pretty girls from rich families did not have to bother themselves with such things as college and career. They were of value only to plain girls from poorer families who had to think of making a living by teaching. She felt sorry for such girls. (p. 263).

The portrayal of Nimmi is not deep or intense as that of other women we have come across so far. The genre here is a social comedy and we do not know how seriously Jhabvala

wants her to be estimated. There is not much of mental exercise of suspense beyond restating the modes of a rich middle class family in the North. Nimmi, getting married to the right man, the Prince Charming, when he comes along, is a foregone conclusion. Though she may not be enough of a radical, though one may wonder if it is worth our while reading about her, it is impossible not to like her and not to be infected by her innocent gaiety.

### The Gathering Clouds

The next quarter of novels depict marital dissonance as one of the major sources of conflict in Indian life. *The Householder* and *Get Ready for Battle* have a wholly Indian cast of Indian characters.<sup>20</sup> They are totally Indian in setting and here the couples in marriage in love show areas of friction that are at times peculiar to the Indian context. Everything is not so funny and rosy in the Indian Eden the Canker has set in slowly. Couples find marriage is not always the unmixed blessing it was said to be. Divorce is in the air, interspersed with brief transient moments of wedded bliss. The moments of domestic harmony are all too brief to linger in the reader's memory.

*The householder* deals with the struggles of Prem in the second stage of life, the 'asrama' of family life. Since the story progresses through his eyes, the women around him are sketched mainly from his point of view. He is a struggling English teacher in a third-rate college in Delhi, struggling to make ends meet, to please his newly wed wife, trying hard to meet his obligations as a family man. Reduction in house rent and a raise in his salary are the two projects he works at. He succeeds in neither and his struggles, failure and frustration are viewed more with fun than with any philosophical intensity, despite the title of the novel.

Prem is very different in tone and range from the other

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20. Hans Leowe, the German friend of Prem is the sole exception. He is a minor character who does not contribute to the progress of the plot.



English teacher, Krishnan, who is R.K. Narayan's creation. He is weak willed, passive and has none of the intellectual flights that Krishnan delights in. Prem, however, is redeemed in his awareness of his shortcomings. He is aware that as a married man, as the head of the family, he has his responsibility to be fulfilled. (p. 92). He is dull, and prosaic and weak willed. He recalls his own marriage thus :

He had not, when it had come to that ultimate point, wanted to be married at all. So he had let everything happen around him—the sweetmeats, the flowers, the band, the coloured lights, the excited bejewelled women and had set silent and withdrawn. He had, he remembered, felt rather resentful. Why should he be taken to be married to this girl whom he had seen only once and whom he had not found at all pretty? And he had been afraid too. He had known that, from that day on, everything would be different for him. (p. 132)

His troubles are added not only by his low pay and tight budgeting but also by his wife and mother. His mother is the usual bundle of grievances, who tries to cling to her son. Indu refuses to yield pride of place to the older woman and Prem is caught in the cross fire : "It was so unpleasant for him that, if he had somewhere else to go, he would never have come home in the evenings." (p. 63). The mother tries to reinforce the feeling in him that Indu is not pretty enough or rich enough for him. Before much damage could be done, Prem tactfully sends her away to his sister's place. This is the only decisive action he takes in the whole story and in this he is successful.

Indu is another of the sensuous, not intellectualized playthings of the senses that Jhabvala writes about so often. Any wind may blow upon such women and play with them at will. They lack a centre of coherence and the sensuous overpowers them completely. Indu here is a slightly better variation of Gulab whom we meet in *Esmond in India* while Amrita, Nimmi and Shakuntala are also an easy prey to what appeals to their senses their attention is diverted at times to matters other than the purely sensuous. Indu is childish, petulant and has not a whiff

of the poetry and the ethereal quality that R.K. Narayan's Sushila is endowed with. She is phlegmatic though not appallingly like Gulab. She is able to run a household, invite guests, cook and serve them a delicious meal and feel honoured as a householder. Still all the cooking, cleaning, shouting at the servant and sleeping make for unvarying monotony.

Her sensuousness appeals to Prem, young and newly-married as he is; he values his sexual experience but at the same time a frustrating atmosphere of guilt and shame is cast about it. He acknowledges his feelings truthfully on learning that she is pregnant: "Her pregnancy was a terrible embarrassment for him. Now everybody would know that he did with her at night in the dark, as quickly and guiltily as he had eaten the nuts and raisins." (p. 8). He has to traverse through the initial years of wedded life and learn to accommodate joy and shame, guilt and privilege and emerge as a matured adult. The process is painful and slow.

Indu relishing sweets, at the party thrown by plump Mrs. Khanna, the Principal's wife is a poignant vignette. It has its touches of the comic too. Indu, earthy as she is, longs for relishes and sweets, as her condition grows advanced and lost to her surroundings, lost to all obvious sense of decorum and elegance, eats with concentration and deliberation. Prem is uneasy, but cannot help as the men and women are segregated as is usual in most gatherings of this sort. He is a helpless witness to Indu's discomfiture: Mrs. Khanna frowned and her eyes travelled upward to Indu, who was just pushing the remnant of a crumbly laddoo into her mouth. Prem watched and could do nothing. Indu looked up, straight into Mrs. Khanna's disapproving face. (p. 75)

From his family background—he states his mother always respected and obeyed his father—and from traditional beliefs he has absorbed the image of the woman as weaker and more dependent than man. Since these older deeply ingrained images still persist, he unconsciously demands unquestioning obedience from his woman. When Indu insists on leaving for her parental home, he is irritated and seeks to assert the superiority

that he equates with the acquired image of the husband. When he forbids her from leaving, surprisingly it is Indu, so far docile and placid, who bursts out; "Who are you to forbid? Now we have come to the limit." She fumes at him and sticks to her resolve. She leaves at the earliest opportunity, leaving Prem to realise, in her absence, that he has grown fond and this girl, the same Indu whom he had but accepted half-heartedly, who was quite different from him, who mulishly opposed him in his wishes. Now absence makes the hearts grow fonder. He sends his mother away and on Indu's return, gives in to her heady sensuous power over him on the roof top, a glorious star-lit night. (p. 118). The householder is now drawn to her emotionally and aware of her potential. In time, Indu may emerge as the responsible, careworn mother in a middle class family, one of the countless numbers of her sisters, who do an incredible balancing act between a shrinking income and a growing family.

### The Battle That Never Was

*Get Ready for Battle* shows once again the minor conflicts in a family setting. There is no battle to speak of, worthy of the title, which has been borrowed from the *Gita*.<sup>21</sup> The characters once again belong to the newly-rich merchants-class in New Delhi, a city and a class of people Mrs. Jhabvala has observed so well and so frequently. It is a pity that Sarla Devi, the wife of Gulzari Lal, who is different from the run-of-the-mill women in Jhabvala's fictive world, has not been developed fully in depth and intensity. In her battle for the preservation of Bundi Basti, a slum dweller's colony under threat of eviction, she could have emerged as a vigorous, enterprising Mother Courage. Instead she appears as a paper revolutionary, to saintly a figure to make any positive impact. She is one modern Indian lady who is willing to accept divorce thrust on her, who accommodates her husband's mistress and finds her to be faultless and good. This Gandhian lady is too good to be true and hence not wholly a convincing figure.

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21. Jhabvala, *Get Ready for battle* (London : John Murray, 1962), pp. 15, 32.

Vishnu, her son and his wife, Mala are the husband and wife team who bicker often and love intensely at times. They are similar to other pairs like Prem and Indu, Suraj and Sarla in *The Aliens*. Sensuous lovers with ornate and overripe imagery such as these leave a cloying effect on the whole plot ; they too seem unreal as they seem to be outside the control of practicalities.

Vishnu and Mala quarrel when Mala wants to leave for Bombay, her parental city. Their quarrel is reminiscent of the one between Indu and Prem. However, here it is a rich urban setting and Vishnu, by relocating his factory to another industrial suburb of Delhi, averts the breach with his wife and opens the way for Mrs Kusum Mehra to move in with his father.

Kusum, the gentlemistress, is another sketchily drawn strange figure. It is incredible that despite her status as a mistress to Gulzari Lal, she evokes no ire or bitterness either in Sarla Devi or in her son and daughter-in-law. She is the good friend and counsellor for all the family members and once again, she is too perfectly drawn to be a credible woman. Tara, the prostitute, serves as a foil to Sarla Devi's goodness and purity. What is portrayed are the minor skirmishes and readjustments made everyday in Indian family life. Sarla Devi is the visionary gleam to pierce through the gathering clouds of phillistinism as represented by Gulzari Lal and ruthless expansion of industrial empires as represented by the astute Vishnu. Whether such a visionary lady could be a tangible reality in a money-mad, power hungry society provides irony to the novel.

The novel lacks the cohesiveness and integrity of the earlier works like *The Nature of Passion* and *The Householder*. None of the women characters seem worth remembering. They are portrayed in a manner which makes it difficult for the reader, Indian and Western, to bridge the credibility gap, given the existing co-ordinates of Indian society. However, the portrayal of domestic conflict and disharmony in family situations interspersed with moments of sensuous pleasure are authentic enough. These moments of physical pleasure that are portrayed so vividly

by Mrs. Jhabvala in man-woman relationships, tend to become increasingly less frequent in subsequent novel until in the last work *Heat and Dust*, physical pleasure is hardly there ; moments of contact serve only as reinforcements of the awareness of the sterility of the human condition.

### The Problem of Identity

*Esmond in India* can be viewed as the expression of the author's inner dilemma : whether to belong or not to India and if one wishes to belong, how to go about it. In *An Experience of India* she states this central problem that bothers the Westerner, especially the sensitive Western writer who lives in India and who aims at concretising her life in India in her literary work :

To live in India and be at peace one must to a very considerable extent become Indian and adopt Indian attitudes, habits, beliefs, assume, if possible an Indian personality. But how is this possible ? And even if it were possible—without cheating oneself—would it be desirable ? Should one want to try and become some thing other than what one is ?<sup>22</sup>

The main characters in this novel try to cope with the experience, the world that is India. Mrs. Jhabvala has externalized her personal predicament, the predicament of transforming her inner life according to the dictates of the outer life.

Esmond Stillwood restates the doctrine of Asian inertia and European dynamism.<sup>23</sup> His thesis is simple : The White world alone is equipped with unique capacity to propagate and enjoy the fruits of culture and sophistication. In his initial reaction to India, the East and all that is foreign to him, he avidly studies up on Indian folklore, traditional poetry and history. Perhaps this explains his fascination with and marriage to Gulab who is the very antithesis of all that culture stands for European

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22. Jhabvala, *An Experience of India*, p. 10.

23. Jhabvala, *Esmond in India* (rpt. Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1980), p.

37. All further references are from this edition of the novel.

eyes. In such a marriage there is neither Western rationality nor Eastern spirituality.

Gulab is one character to whom the problem of identity does not arise at all. Only daughter of a doting mother, petted and pampered and brought up in a sheltered way, it is definitely a puzzle as to how she felt attracted to and got herself married to Esmond who, differs not only in his background but also in his personal taste and mode of living, so drastically from her. Sometimes Gulab's immersion in her sensory appetite (here mainly with reference to her eating) seems to be so total that she looks more of an amorphous, amoebic mass of flesh, slowly munching its way through a mountain of food and not a genuine Indian woman at all. She is slovenly, sluggish, dim witted and the moments she spares from her moronic munching, she spends lying about in her bed. Her appearance, her lack of personal hygiene, her slovenly eating and vacuous living habits make her so repulsive that one wonders whether Esmond's initial enthusiasm turning to extreme revulsion in a couple of years is not valid after all.

In the characterisation of Gulab, the limits to verisimilitude are seen to be transgressed frequently. Gulab is full of the spicy smell of Indian cooking and this added to her languorous placidity, drives him crazy. He becomes sarcastic but his sneer, his contempt are all lost on Gulab. She looks pretty but she is so unresponsive and stolid that Esmond wants to break out from his trap of a dull, heavy, alien and meaningless marriage: "He thought of himself as trapped—trapped in her stupidity, in her dull heavy, alien mind, which could understand nothing: not him, not his way of life nor his way of thought." (p. 37).

The birth of their son, Ravi, hastens the process of alienations:

Ravi was as dark as his mother. He looked completely Indian. At first, when Ravi was born, Esmond had been very happy about this: he had wanted an Indian son, a real piece of India, as he had wanted an Indian

wife. Now, however, he thought wistfully of fair sturdy little boys with blue eyes and pink cheeks. Angels not angles, he often found himself murmuring, quite out of context; he could see them. But Ravi was definitely dark. (p. 34).

Esmond prefers to lead his own life, eating his cheese salad "at his smart little dining table in his smart little dining corner." He and his setting looked "rather like a beautifully photographed full-page advertisement in an American magazine. It was very different from Gulab's spicy meal eaten on the floor out of brass bowls." (p. 33)

He feels embarrassed taking her out to social gatherings. She is also miserable when forced to meet and mingle with his friends. In the end he leaves her alone and this process of estrangement suits them both: "He found that her absence was far more impressive than her presence." He gives his English friends the false impression of Gulab as a real old fashioned Indian lady, veiled, shy, sitting in a marble courtyard with the fountain splashing around, her maid singing love lyrics and serving her assiduously. He escapes social scrutiny by cleverly giving evasive or distant replies when questioned about his wife, "suggesting that the internal arrangements of his household were too private and oriental to be discussed." (p. 34).

The novel as a whole precludes the possibility of any meaningful relationship between a man and a woman, whether Indian or European. In Gulab's case the futility of cross-country marriages trying to bridge the impenetrable cultural barriers, imposed both ways, is exposed. It is strange that Esmond, who is skillful at playing on other's senses, who tries to be wholly English, could fall for Gulab who is so unlike him in every respect. It is equally surprising that she, ever docile and placid like a cow, could rebel against a loving mother and break her engagement with Amrit, a boy selected for her by the elders, as being suitable to her and the two families, in the traditional manner. Where do all her individuality and strength of will disappear once she is married to Esmond?

She reverts to the pattern of traditional womanhood. She practices what her mother Uma declares to be the ideal: "It is true, a husband is a woman's God, it is written so in all our old books" (p. 78). Like Sita of the epic, though bitter and unhappy, she tries to defend Esmond against her relative's accusations. (p. 59) She condones his infidelities "drawing comfort from the fact that they were only with white women. This made it somehow less humiliating." (p. 61). She is as blind and adamant in sticking to a meaningless marriage as when she married Esmond against the wishes of her family.

Ram Nath, her idealist of an uncle, gently tries to wean her away from her cow-like existence. He cannot make any contact with her for she manages to submerge all thought in the sensuous satisfaction of the moment. She does not draw on any reserves of courage to live with Esmond. She lives, hardly allowing herself to think, as a great amorphous mass of sensuous life, or softness and sweet cloying tastes. He tries to instil some values, a message into her but it does not register at all. He says :

We are afraid that there is something in your mind which makes you think it is a very great wrong for a wife to go away from her husband because she belongs to him and it is his right to treat her in any fashion he likes. This is not true. No person has a right to treat another person in any fashion he likes. Please remember you are an individual being first and a wife only second. (p. 133).

But Ram Nath's advising her is futile. He himself realises the futility: "Talking to her was, in fact, rather like a sinking one's finger into a nice plump rubber cushion; one could expect to make the same amount of impression and one that lasted just as long." (p. 132). That she could exist through a strife torn marital union as a mass of unthinking, languorous flesh is difficult to believe. The spark of individuality that she showed in choosing Esmond as her partner in life seems to have been snuffed out by married life and childbirth. How else to explain



her patient sufferance of Esmond even when he tyrannically manhandles her, as if she were just an animal ? (p. 164).

Just as she marries Esmond for the wrong reasons, she leaves him for the wrong reasons. Till the end, Gulab is too much of an enigma to be puzzled out satisfactorily. In a melodramatic scene we see her driving out the servant who tried to molest her. (pp. 198-99) In her primeval mind, she looks upon herself as a possession of her husband he, her husband is a god to her and she has to remain pure and undefiled for him. She considers herself now defiled and made unclean by a servant whom she had not thought it necessary to consider human. Her understanding of her situation as a wife is nearly summed in the following words :

It was a husband's right, so her instinct told her, to do whatever he liked with his wife. He could treat her well or badly, pamper her or beat her, that was up to him and it was not her place to complain. But in return there was one thing, only one that he owed her, and that was his protection ; it was his duty to see that she was safe in his house and that no stranger could cast insulting eyes on her. Esmond had failed in that duty; so now he was no more her husband. Nor she his wife : since she considered herself defiled, she could not remain in his house any longer but had to return, as was the custom, to her own people. (pp. 199-200).

This volte face of a woman who is adamant and enterprising enough to break an arranged marriage and marry a foreigner, who is not a Hindu, not even an Indian, reverting to a medieval concept of chastity and husband's duty is scarcely reconcilable to the average reader. Esmond as a husband, as a human being could be found fault with on many points. However, it is difficult to adhere to Gulab's ascribing her defilement to him, to his lack of protection of his wife. Gulab, as an extremely irrational and primeval woman, is an aberration from the norm one is accustomed to and is easily forgotten, lacking as she is, in a central coherence and identity.

### **The Negation of Love**

The other women in the corpus of the joint family, though portrayed with Jhabvala's usual accuracy of detail and finesse,

serve to reinforce the negation of love or any other genuinely felt emotion. Uma, Gulab's widowed mother, swings at times from pathetic maternal love to misplaced trust in swamis and superstitions. Lakshmi, the idealist Ram Nath's wife, is the usual nagger, unable to understand the extent of her husband's sacrifice or grasp his intellectual acumen. Madhuri, the wife of Har Dayal, is another sharply drawn portrait in the ironic mode. While Dayal has pretensions of being immersed in India's tradition and culture, his wife pretends to be a fragile sophisticated lady. While he spouts puerile translations of Sanskrit verse, she exposes herself steadily as the hollow phillistine that she is. Though it is amusing to note her callous manipulation of people around her and her deference to money above all else, it is also a sad commentary on the dearth of any genuine relationship in the family, on the dearth of ideal role models for Indian womanhood to aspire to. Indira, the young daughter-in-law in the family learns steadily from her mother-in-law Madhuri, how to be as manipulative and materialistic as the older woman.

The negative attitude towards life and love is stated afresh by the author. Gulab marries Esmond for love and is totally disappointed. Esmond seeks the glories of Indian culture and tradition in her and is utterly frustrated. He feels he is trapped in marriage with an animal. Madhuri manipulates her husband and son with a heavy hand clothed in a glove of velvet. She looks delicate like eggshell China but she runs the family according to her will. There is no question of any heart felt emotion in her relationship with the other members of the family. Everything is a pose, a stepping stone to greater wealth and comfort as far as she is concerned. She is astute enough to weigh the advantages of Western education and training with the Indian way of living and strike a comfortable balance.

England, Europe, even America were all right for education or sightseeing but one always had to come back to one's own dear India. It was here that one's root were, here that one could get the best positions, here that one

enjoyed one's money and property and one's proper social status. It was safe here, comfortable. (p. 22).

Lakshmi spends her time berating Ram Nath for having reduced her to poverty. Ram Nath himself is confused with the net result of his simple living and high thinking and is enfeebled by age and disillusionment. Uma is torn asunder by the predicament of Gulab and Ravi. Even Esmond, shallow and vain as he is, trying to boost his shallow acquaintance with facets of Indian living and culture into a kind of super touristic literature is not genuinely happy or interested in what he is saying. While his gift of superficial jargon earns him a living as an amiable and knowledgeable guide, he tries hard to relate to both England and India and he is a misfit in both the cultures. He feels choked by the wrappings of an Indian marriage and tries to escape *via* Betty the English tourist. His relationship with Betty is also equally dry, acerbic and sterile.

Jhabvala not only exposes the snobbishness and crudity of the Western sahibs in India; she also turns her sardonic eye on the pretentious Indians who under the guise of acquired Western culture and veneer of sophistication tend to downgrade their own heritage. In such an artificial and strained context, there is plenty of scope for an ironic view of life not for the growth of any genuinely felt emotion or purposiveness in life.

Narayan, the competent doctor who chooses to live and work in a village, is reduced to asking his father repeatedly to find him a suitable wife, a wife who would understand and live amiably with him and his high principles. All about him one finds women who are warped by circumstances, who cannot or would not understand higher goals, who do not want to face the larger, the vital issues of life.

### **Shakuntala, Another Casual Conquest**

Shakuntala, the daughter of Har Dayal and Madhuri, a young energetic girl, just out of college, raises our hopes for

Indian womanhood early in the novel. She seems like Kuchira, more in love with love than being aware of the realities around her.<sup>24</sup> She imbibes a fondness for taking about what she calls the 'fundamentals of life', no doubt from her father. Amrit, her brother, reports that her favourite word is 'ideals'. Head held erect, eyes shinning, she seems to mean what she says :

What is the use of our motor cars and nice clothes and jewels and all our servants, if our lives are without purpose and we have no ideals to guide us? How happy I would be to give all these things up for the sake of a great Ideal ! (p. 74).

Shakuntala resembles up to a point Nimmi in *The Nature of Passion*, both being fed on romantic notions of love and both being recklessly receptive to the appeal of sensuousness. However, Nimmi, somehow seems to be agile and aware enough to slip out of a sticky situation at Kutb with the verve of a Restoration Comedienne. Shakuntala on the other hand, becomes progressively heavier, coarse, crudely passionate and less likeable.

She is immature and gets carried away by her momentary passion and sensuality that Esmond evokes on her. With the Taj Mahal in moonlight, with the poetic beauties of Shelley in the background, she succumbs completely to the temptation of the flesh. Gone is her avowed admiration of Narayan. She has no qualms about betraying the domestic felicity of her friend and classmate Gulab :

Esmond, I know you are married and also you have a child, but I tell you this means nothing to me. Only I know you have come into my life and now it is my

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24. See the similarity to Nalini in "A Course of English Studies" in Jhabvala's third collection of short stories, *An Experience of India* (London : John Murray, 1967). Ruchira and Nilima in *A Stronger Climate* (London : John Murray, 1963) are also portraits of Young immature and romantic minded heroines like Shakuntala.

duty to give everything I have to you, to adore you and serve you to be your slave. (p. 148).

Esmond, on the rebound from Gulab, piqued by Betty, feels proud to be loved by a young romantic girl and gives in with tolerant affection to her pleading for love. It is not an affirmation of love that Shakuntala enjoys but a brief moment of physicality; she is too young and foolish to distinguish between the two. Esmond exploits his appeal to her sensuousness, awakens her responses and lets her share a night with him.

Shakuntala imagines herself to be in love and goes around singing "Esmond, my love" telephones him often and makes herself a bit of a nuisance in his well-manicured life. She engineers to him come home as nurse to herself and her brother's wife. She is cloaked in pseudo-romantic thrills of her own imagination while Esmond finds her as cloying and crude as Gulab. While Gulab is labelled as a slattern of the lady variety, Shakuntala is called a slattern of the Bohemian variety. He endures the latter mainly for the sake of the money her father pays him, while at times he feels flattered by the devotion she showers on him. He had allowed her to sleep with him, one more conquest in a series of casual encounters. To him it is nothing more nor less than a temporary physical need and its fulfilment.

To Shakuntala it is of unspeakable significance and it has far-reaching consequences in her life. She turns into a lover demanding constant attention from him and he starts feeling trapped by her etc. Gulab behind him and Shakuntala before him and lessons in culture to silly woman with money paid out discreetly in envelopes—he is tired of it all, the eternal shabbiness, internal and external.

There was no romance about life in India. Esmond knew; only for tourists, he thought bitterly, who clapped their hands in delight over what was, he knew, only shabbiness and poverty repeated to a point where the spirit yawned at the boredom and futility of it all. Now he longed for England where there were solid grey houses

and solid grey people, and the sky was kept within decent proportions. (p. 202).

He finds India to be too much to stomach and his decision to leave for England with Betty makes him feel young, free and sprightly. Thinking of the sea, the voyage back to England with gentle games of tennis aboard the ship, he dallies around with Shakuntala in the last pages of the novel. Shakuntala is still wrapped up in her 'sea of happiness' and bursts out to him: "Life is wonderful, wonderful!" Life is equally wonderful to him with a romantic young girl madly in love with him, with prospects of his escape from a country which threatens to crush him into insignificance. Neither Shakuntala nor Gulab and Ravi mean anything to him. His is a negative response to love and life in India. The women who cross his path do not aid him in discovering an inner core of fulfilment. His restlessness drives him onward. One wonders whether Shakuntala would retrieve her balance and get settled down to married life with an arranged partner after Esmond's departure from India. The pretentiousness and the hollow phillistinism of the so-called cultured and sophisticated people, Indian and European, have been expressed sharply by Jhabvala.

### Poor and Backward

That Mrs. Jhabvala is extremely sensitive and has developed an enormous guilt complex towards the poverty and misery which encircle the privileged, opulent few in India is seen in her novel *A Backward Place*. To the handful of foreigners living in an artificial life in Delhi, India is not urbane but backward in every sense; poverty and backwardness are so predominant that it is impossible to pretend they do not exist. Clarissa, the Hochstadts, Judy and Etta agonise when confronted with the miseries of life in India, though not in the same way that Mrs. Jhabvala seems to have done :

The most salient fact about India is that it is very poor and backward. There are so many other things to be said about it but this must remain the basis of all of them. We may praise Indian democracy, go into raptures over Indian music, admire Indian intellectuals—



well with Indians. They feel I am one of them, you see. (pp. 192-93)

She boasts of a special vibration between herself and the Indians and yet she is rejected both by them and the English. She tries to scrounge on Judy, Etta, on Guppy the fat, calculative hotel-owner and admirer of white flesh ; she tries her hand at being a secretary, a portrait painter, a woman of all trades. She, however, arrives nowhere. It is a pathetic sight of one woman, whatever her role or creed be, being forced to shift, to compromise constantly for the sake of nothing higher than an ordinary decent living. Virginia Woolf's credo that a woman needs a room of her own and a comfortable income to exist as an author is applicable in extension here ; minimum material comforts are indispensable for a woman to maintain her dignity as a human being.<sup>26</sup>

### **The Aging Beauty**

Etta, the aging beauty, fights a losing battle against alienation, old age and want at another level. She had once been young and vivacious and pretty enough to have a throng of admirers around her :

Starting with her first husband, who had brought her out here to conquer and charm this virgin territory, where lively blondes such as she were few and far between enough to be at the highest premium. There had been a succession, which in the folly of her youth she had thought inexhaustible, of young Indians : all with this in common that they were, on the one hand fascinated with and completely uncritical of the ways of blondes and on the other, were all well-born, well-bred, charming, slender, athletic with black eyes and black hair and strong white teeth forever at the ready to flash at all her witty sayings. At that time all had been as wonderful as she had a right to expect ; and yes—when

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26. See Jhabvala, "Miss Sahib", *A Stronger Climate* (London : John Murray, 1963). Miss Tuhy here serves as an extension of Clarissa in old age.





protected and could have caught upon the latest trends in dress and living. She needs Guppy, crude as he is :

She could not face it alone : to break through such a barrier of indifference would take more strength and youth than she had had for a good number of years. She longed for Europe, it was true and would do anything to get there, but she could no longer tackle it on her own. (p. 213)

Unlike Esmond who plans a way out, she is totally trapped in a country whose spirit is alien to her, whose masses of people induce revulsion in her.

A young buxom Punjabi girl effortlessly substitutes in her place as the new paramour and 'niece' to Guppy, leaving her to fret and fume in her flat. She cannot come to a compromise, cannot adjust to a changed set of values as Judy tries to do. While Etta dreams of concerts and theatres, elegant meals and haute couture, and bitterly regrets living in an 'uncivilized' country, Judy, never having known these aspects of Western culture does not have deep regrets :

The things Etta spoke of were familiar to Judy only from the magazines and the pictures, and she had no hopes that they would ever enter into her own circumstances. Her western world was only little semi-detached with smoking fires and frozen pipes and carefully drawn curtains bought at two and eleven a yard at the sales. (p. 216).

While Guppy coplanes with his newly found 'niece', Etta bravely tries to pull herself up and patch up her ravaged body and mind to meet the requirements of another admirer, a Parsi, Mr. Jumperwala. The choice of such a name is deliberate and adds to the irony of the situation. The novel closes with her recovering from a half-hearted attempt at suicide and Mr. Jumpey dancing comic attendance on her. She knows this also would be a brief interlude but senses herself powerless to break out of the downward spiral. She becomes another case history in Dr. Hochstadt's study on aging beauties and the adaptations required in their Western consciousness to live and survive in the East.

## 'Poor Judy'

Between the two options of either merging with Hindu society or drowning in it, that are offered to us by the author in *A Backward Place*, if Etta chooses to drown in it, Judy chooses to merge with it. (p. 25). Judy had married, like Etta, an Indian student in London. Both had come to India, taking their chances on a strange marriage in an alien country and there their resemblance ends. Etta, the typical European cannot adapt herself to India and remains what she was: there is no conviction or idealism to carry her through as we see in *Clarissa*. There is no question of adaptation or involvement as we see in Judy.

Judy, her long hair in a bun, clad in a cotton sari, in order to be like everyone else, tries her best to make her marriage work. In this perhaps, she is more Indian than most Indian women like Mrs. Kaul. in the same novel. Her husband, Bal, is one more of those effeminate, good-for-nothing heroes, spouting philosophy in coffeehouse, doing nothing with inherent dignity, depending on relatives and womenfolk to see them through, like drones in hive: Here Bal is an out-of-work actor, waiting for his big chance, a dreamer who lives off Judy's earnings as secretary to the Cultural Dais.

Anchored firmly to the ground with two children and in-laws, any discussion of the unsuitability of her married life, of her life in India is purely theoretical to Judy. The Western women's attitude to married life in India is tersely summed up by Etta :

Marrriages, my dear, are made to be broken, that's one of the rules of modern civilization. Just because we happen to have landed ourselves in this primitive society, that's no reason why we should submit to their primitive morality. (p. 3)

Judy is urged time and again by her European friends that she has to face up to her mistake of a marriage to an out-of-work Indian actor, that she has to get out of it before it is too late. Yet Judy, with ten years of married life and two children

behind her, is phlegmatic by nature and sticks on with the stubbornness that the English sometimes display in adversity. Perhaps she is the only character in the whole novel, who has grasped the truth behind one of Dr. Hochstadt's axioms: "It is fatal to come to India and expect to be able to live to a Western rhythm." (p. 32).

Judy, being pragmatic, has a family to support. She is busy earning a living as a typist-cum-receptionist at the cultural organisation run by Mrs. Kaul, one of Delhi's socialites, who have plenty of money, time and energy on their hands and do not know what to do with themselves apart from shaping their lives to suit trends in fashion. Judy goes to work out of necessity, not out of choice. It keeps her busy, and this, with the running of the family leaves her no time for brooding, for developing trendy neuroses. She knows where alienation and excessive brooding would lead to. Her mother had ended her bored lonely life by hanging herself in the flat that she lived in alone with her bric-a-brac and she does not want to end up the same way.

*A Backward Place* is a study of how these three Western women react to life in India. Etta had come here, taking her chances on a sudden impulsive marriage, and after a series of marriages and liaisons, finds it harder and harder to latch on to young, wealthy admirers to keep her going. Old age creeps in on her and she finds herself in the unenviable position of a performing monkey, contorting herself to be charming and sprightly at all times and to please old men like Guppy. Clarissa had come to India spurred on by Romain Rolland, the Gita and Ramayana. One sympathises with her when one recalls "how valiantly she tries to keep up her ~~quest~~ or at least the pretence of it, though she was getting older year by year, and lonelier and more ridiculous, and ~~soon~~ and God perhaps no nearer." (p. 117).

Judy, according to Clarissa is ~~not to be pitied at all~~ "She's doing very nicely. She ~~had the good sense to realise~~ that the only way to live here ~~was to turn herself into a~~ Indian wife." (p. 25).

## English Girl in Indian Slum

The process of merging, of adaptation is by no means easy or fully achieved. Yet it is to Judy's credit that she attempts bravely at living in India as the Indians do. She has come gradually to accept life as it is instead of seizing it and challenging it like Etta. 'God provides' says the old aunt cheerfully (p. 79). Judy, strange to say has been driven to accepting this not by any faith or conviction in Hinduism or Indian beliefs but because of the English way of living that had not wrought happiness for her parents :

Perhaps this was a reaction against her parents who; in their middle age, had spent much time and worry over the problem of how they would manage on the old age pension. And in the end the problem had not arisen. (p. 79)

Like Sarah in Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*, Judy is driven firmly into the fold of her Indian family by her English associates and recollections. She maintains the stiff English upper lip, takes on her responsibilities seriously and tries to accommodate a husband who is childish, whimsical and difficult enough to live with.<sup>27</sup> Etta needles Bal into fury by taunting him at the picnic site as the husband who comes home only to eat and sleep and make more babies : "Of course, no one can accuse you of being a reactionary husband. You don't keep her locked up at home—Oh no, you're a modern man with advanced ideas. You send her out to work." (p. 172).

While Bal is furious at being insulted, Judy carries on as usual. He shouts at her, orders her not to go out for work and let him be disgraced. The dreamer that he is he now wants to go to Bombay and try his hand in the film world. It is practical Judy who is frightened of the prospects of arriving

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27. Nirad C. Chaudhri, *To Live or Not to Live* (New Delhi : Orient, 1970), p. 126. He laments about the increasing tendency of Indian women being forced to go out to work while their menfolk, fathers, husbands and sons live on their earnings complacently.

jobless with her meagre savings in a strange city with two children and an impulsive immature husband. She wants to be sensible, responsible, for English people didn't behave like that, they didn't on the whim of the moment given up everything they had and go wandering off in search of no one knew what... She was determined to hold on tight to what she had, like her mother, like her Aunt Agnes, like all those other stubborn dwellers in little houses among whom she had grown up and who, she now decided, were her kind. (p. 219).

Yet Judy reckons without the power of life in India. Her sister-in-law, her aunt-in-law point to her the advantages in accepting life's challenges as they crop up unexpectedly. Her quarrels with Bal wear her out. She comes gradually to see her home, her job and her make-shift arrangements in Delhi as transient and too trivial a cause to say no to the challenges in life, too insignificant to be tied down to them whereas the outside world is so wide and fluid with possibilities. She comes to terms with her life, accepting it as a paradox and yet rejoicing in it, giving herself to it the way a lover might. She is the only European woman who has managed to survive in India and exist as a woman, as a human person in Jhabvala's fictive world.<sup>28</sup> While Clarissa stagnates, Etta recovers from an overdose of sleeping pills, Judy sets out with her family towards unknown and distant Bombay. The English girl wife in the Indian slum has learnt from her wise well-wishers like Jayakar : "People are not born to sit safe and quiet in their own homes. What sort of life is that ? And what can ever be achieved when our people behave like mice in holes ?" (p. 188) Life in Bombay, she knows, is not going to be rosy either but she has ceased to be one among the mice in holes.

### **The Seekers and the sufferers**

The last two novels *A New Dominion* and *Heat and Dust* are

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28. Peggy in "The Aliens" and Cathy in "The Young Couple", Ruchira in "In Love with a Beautiful Girl", Betsy in "Passion", the anonymous English girl, the wife of Henry in the story "An Experience of India", Gwen and Maggie in "A Star and Two Girls" are examples of the women in Jhabvala's short stories who try to cope with similar cross country, intercultural relationships.

depressing and sordid tales about European women coming to India on a quest for spirituality and coherence and ending up as studies in self-delusion. If the Europeans seem naive and gullible and weak, the Indians fare no better : they are invariably small-minded and sensual with a total absence of any genuine love or fellow feeling. All the characters display a lack of stability, of emotional balance, of fulfilment of any sort, Indian or Western.<sup>29</sup> The stories can be read as an extension or an aesthetic exploration of the European writer's predicament, living in India. What it is like to live and write in India, being born and bred in Europe is the one thread of continuity in all her novels.

*A New Dominion* opens with the three European girls Lee, Margaret and Evie, each trying to get spiritual salvation under the guidance of a Swami, a holy man. The Swamiji here, the head of the Centre for Spiritual Rejuvenation is a disturbing study of an ascetic who uses his powers to create illusions of hope and bliss and claims wholly the souls and bodies of all his disciples. He has no qualms, either moral or religious, in abusing these girls sexually. He is a bogus god-man and it is difficult to realise how even Lee, the more rational and clear-eyed of the trio, could fall a prey to him.

Lee had come to India 'to lose herself in order to find herself', as she puts it. This is in contrast to the blind faith of Evie in the Swamiji and to Margaret ; of whom she says :

She's a very definite kind of girl. Even her coming here was a definite decision. She didn't just drift into it the way I did. Margaret came here because she had to. It was an active step of revolt against her life at home and her family. (p. 27).

Evie seems mindless, believing in merging herself completely, implicitly with Swamiji. Margaret's will is broken mainly because her health fails her. She pins her faith on the holy man's powers of rejuvenation and refuses Raymond, the

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29. *A New Dominion* and *Heat and Dust* have been acclaimed widely for their structural finesse and compactness.

rational tourist's offer of hospitalisation and treatment. Lee's relationship with the Swamiji is a continuous tussle. While her mind veers away from his sensual and materialistic aspects she nevertheless, feels drawn towards him and is psychically disturbed. Lee's experience of sexual intercourse with the Swamiji at midnight, is frightful and sordid by any standard. (p. 169) It is a pity the three English girls are tormented by their love for such a manipulator of women. Each tries to jealously guard her proximity to this bogus holyman who becomes the agent of their ruin. Margaret dies a slow painful death, Evie lives in a mindless stupor and at novel's end we see Lee struggling hard to resist her temptation to go back to him.

The three girls had tried to break out of the commercialism, pretentiousness and falsity of middle class life in England. They placed their faith in the Swamiji, thinking he will bring succour to their tormented souls and transform them into new unified beings at peace with themselves and the world. Instead we have a sordid picture of selfish manipulation, sexual abuse, midnight orgies and callousness verging on cruelty. The Swamiji treats them as his possessions, his 'little mice' waiting to be developed by him. (p. 178)

Lee who does not want to lead a controlled life, who feels engulfed by small things in English society, comes to India and reaches the point of no return soon enough in her relationship with the Swamiji. She does break out once out of his magnetic spell and runs under the protective umbrella of rationalists like Raymond and the missionary lady, Charlotte.

But her escapade is all too brief. The Swamiji tells Raymond with pompous assurance : "And I will take her, and we shall start again from the beginning. But this time we shall go further. I will take her far, very far, right to the end if need be—and this time there will be no running away." (p. 179)

While we have to bear in mind the journalistic emphasis on all the strange, odd and quixotic elements in Indian life rather than the realities of the situation, Lee's predicament stems also from her incapacity to distinguish between simple bodily



pleasure and the joy of spiritual merger. We see this confusing aspect in not only her relationship with the Swamiji but also with other men ; when she lets her Indian friend Gopi make love to her, she suffers through the experience laconically, thinking "perhaps this was part of the merging she had so ardently desired while looking out of the window." (p. 42). Every experience approximates to the grotesque when it is elevated to spiritual terms, regardless of the other realities in the context.

The women from the West, here in Jhabvala's world, seem to have decided against marriage and family life. This is perhaps her way of sharing her own experience of living in the crossfire between dying values of two cultures, and the many curious experiments that are generated in the name of values and individual freedom when two different cultures come into contact with one another. Her vision of Europeans living in India is jagged with a tormented view of traditional taboos and inhibitions and a foray into new thickets of gay freedom, adultery, trial relationships and pseudo-religious cults. Not one character in these two later novels remains pure or unvictimised. The old credo of virginity is entirely absent but the new freedom that the women, Indian and European, enjoy as liberated beings, as emancipated wives and daughters, the new level of honesty they boast of, has led them nowhere. They are faced with new problems, different traumas and a new set of puzzling dilemmas so that life once again is adventure like walking the high strung, swaying trapeze. Under such circumstances, the picture of the white woman carrying the burden of grace and civilisation into a chaotic society is simply obsolete and redundant.

### Princess Asha

Jhabvala's approach is equally negative when she delineates the Indian characters in the novel. The princely family here has none of the vigour and vitality that is displayed in Markandaya's *The Golden Honeycomb*. While in other novelists like Markandaya and Desai we see the evolution from simple peasant type heroines towards complex, articulate, introspec-

tive women engaged in a concentrated exploration of their lives, here we see the movement from flibbertigibbet Sallies like Amrita and Shakuntala towards neurotic, emotionally unbalanced, maniac-ridden women like Princess Asha. Among vacuous, weak willed sensual men, amidst hints of homosexual relationships, we have Princess Asha displaying the ennui of the rich. Life has given her every advantage including just the right number of trendy neuroses. Though she professes to spend a large portion of her life seeking spiritual fulfilment, what she really looks for is sensory satisfaction and ends up in one trouble after another. Her husband having died early enough, she falls in and out of love with a rapidity that amazes even her equally flighty-high-society friends.

Asha confides to Lee : "Now what is left for me ? How should I spend my days ? How go from one day to the other ? You tell me." (p. 33). Lee cannot provide the answer. Asha who does not believe in higher things in life, who believes in being overpowered by the sensuous, captures Gopi and keeps him entangled in a sticky relationship despite the fact that his marriage has already been arranged. Yet Asha, in the middle of her erotic pursuits knows, like any Hindu, where it all leads to. In the arid princely landscape nothing happens. There are no sudden revelations of truth, there is no sudden transformation—the kind the Westerners hope to find in India. As reckoned by the Hindus and perhaps, Gore Vidal, this dark chaotic age of Kali seethes with confusions, corruptions and misapprehension. There are shopping centre swamis, jet-lagged and sexually satiated gurus, and swarms of hippies seeking enlightenment, cheaper drugs and opportunity. Asha seeks an escape from this circle by going to Benares and living with her spiritual mentor, Banubai.

Banubai is an intriguing female counterpart of Lee's Swamiji. At times she seems to be childlike, singing hymns, reducing Krishna to a doe-eyed pinup on the wall. At other times, she seems to let her fancy roam as freely as Asha. Witness her attachment to Gopi the good looking, but empty headed youth, taken up variously by the different characters in the novel. Yet there is a special relationship between

Banubai and Asha and the latter comes to her repeatedly to make herself whole again: "And Asha felt that, yes, Banubai was right. What were all her troubles finally—what was the world, what was Gopi or her own advancing years and frequent despair: it was all really nothing." (p. 99) Asha feels washed and clean after a stay with Banubai. Yet this state of wholesomeness, like everything else, is also transient. The reader does not feel that Asha's miseries are serious enough to get worked up about. She is another character for us to forget, the sooner the better.

### **Heat and Dust, Germs and Disease**

Jhabvala's latest novel *Heat and Dust* is another novel that deals with the sordid aspects of sex and pregnancy concerning women in India. It is the story of Olivia, beautiful, bored, spoilt and wilful, who as the wife of Douglas, the District Collector of Satipur, outrages the sensibility of the English and the natives by eloping with the equally wilful, eccentric and autocratic Nawab of Khatm. The story narrated by Douglas' grand daughter by his second wife. The young narrator who remains anonymous, comes back, fifty years latter, to the heat, dust, germs, disease and general squalour of Satipur trying to reconstruct Olivia's life and attempting to solve the enigma of her elopement and scandal.

The narrator, being young, gives us, at one stroke, a double view of India through old and young English eyes, Olivia's and hers. The double narration, skilfully constructed, gives an aura of insight with detachment and keen observation, bridges the generation gap in the attitudes of English women in India over a period of time and is, in its aspects of technique and structural compactness, no mean achievement for a writer not born English or Indian.

What strikes on at the outset is the effect of the Indian environment on the European sensibility. India seem to make demands on Olivia and the young narrator as well as the other minor characters, demands which are difficult to reconcile. They are faced with Jhabala's dilemma of break-

down of personality or salvation by withdrawal or flight, a dilemma that is absent in the earlier comedies which dealt with the ironic situations in daily life in India, trying to laugh them off from the vantage point of a light unfettered, uninvolved, funloving consciousness. Gone too are the days of hesitation and confusion that we find in the second or middle group of novels. Here as in *A new Dominion* the die has been cast: Major Minnies is definite about the harmful effects that living in India engenders in the European consciousness, especially so in the case of the women.<sup>30</sup>

India overwhelms them. The narrator is warned the day she arrives at Bombay by the missionary lady at her hostel that, 'nothing human means anything here, not a thing.' (p. 9). Olivia, shut up in her bungalow all day long, to protect herself from the harsh climate, reminds one of Jhabvala herself, who speaks of her being immuned in an air conditioned room. Yet the electric power fails often, the oppressive heat and dust seep in, and affect the writer's sensitivity: "India swallows me up and now it seems to me that I am no longer in my room but in the white hot city streets under a white hot sky....."<sup>31</sup>

The European, used to a cool clean climate abhors the heat and the dust and also as Etta puts it, the germs and the disease that India offers to her visitors. The suitability of the title is evident enough in this light. However, she also hints that discomforts of life in India do not rest at the physical level. They symbolise obliquely other aspects of existence, more deeply embeded. The young tourist, the narrator meets at the guest house tells her that she came to find peace in India: "But all I found was dysentery." Her companion adds his own sneering remark: "That's all anyone ever finds here." (p. 21). This jaundiced view of India is found repeatedly in the novel that it ceases to shock or mystify the reader. The Indian environment

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30. Jhabvala, *Heat and Dust* (1975 rpt. New Delhi: Hind, 1978), pp. 174-75. All further references are from this edition of the novel.

31. Jhabvala, "Living in India", *London Magazine* (September, 1970), p. 42.

emerges as an oppressive factor that not only grips and warps the characters but also taken hold of the author's imagination and creative skills.

The heat of the Indian summer aggravates the European sensibility already frayed by India's poverty and the rich Indians' insensibility to his poor brethren. Here is Jhabvala on the impact of the heat on herself and her fellow Europeans:

Only those who have lived through days of endless Indian heat know their effect on one's behaviour. The Western characters in my novels are amazed at themselves. They yell at servants; 'My God,' they ask, 'What's happening to me? What's happening to me? My Western characters who of course include myself—have reason to be appalled at the transformation to which they are being subjected. Along with their behaviour their most cherished principles and feelings seem to be changing.<sup>32</sup>

The European woman used to a cool climate and a quieter organised life, perhaps changes her temperament when disturbed by this unbearable heat, dust, noise and disease that she is surround with in India. She quarrels, loses her equanimity, her sense of decorum and balance, leading to a disintegration of her personality. Disorganized, disoriented that she is, her spiritual quest in India gets distorted, her frustrations lead to deep disillusionment and all kinds of acts, physical and mental involve her in sordid relationships that leave a lingering bad taste long after the novel is finished. This is one way of explaining the conduct of such heroines as Olivia and her step granddaughter who narrates the story.

### **Aridity all Around**

If the aridity of Maupur *A New Dominion* can be multiplied a hundred fold, we could reproduce the princely India that is depicted in *Khatm* in this novel. The Nawab or the ruler is as quixotic, unrealistic crude and sensual as they come in the

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32. Jhabvala, "Moonlight, Jasmine and Rickets", *The New York Times*: (New York : April 22, 1975), p. 35.

pages of history. He has little to recommend him and it is a surprise that Olivia, who appears to be genuinely in love with Douglas in the early part of the novel, should leave the erect and well-behaved civil servant of a husband and fall for this brutish brigand of a prince. All the trappings, quixotic, strange, erotic and eccentric that would strike a foreigner, on visiting a Nawab's palace are enumerated in detail. The Nawab has his share of purdha ladies, led by his mother, the Begum, who resembles an Italian Borgia especially when she assists in Olivia's induced miscarriage. There are hijras or eunuchs, there is the hint of homosexual relationship with another English visitor Harry.

There is enough evidence of the despotism of the ruler. He is separated from his first wife ; his treasury is almost empty, he consorts with his fellow brigands to improve his finances and he is kept in check by the British through the Agent, Major Minnies. In the midst of all this, he finds time to lure Olivia to Baba Firdaus's shrine of fertility where barren women go to pray for a son and an heir. The scene of the seduction is in itself, weird and taxes one's credibility. The Nawab narrating the murderous exploits of his ancestors should have induced revulsion in Olivia, who does in so much for art and aesthetic appreciation. Instead we see her tying meekly her string of red thread in the shrine, praying devoutly and consenting readily to lie with her lover under the tree nearby. One has, perhaps, to ascribe her easy fall to the call of flesh to the powers of the shrine and the saint entombed within !

It is equally strange that the young narrator seeking to reconstruct Olivia's life in India, should, under identical circumstance, take as her lover, Inder Lal, the meek clerk [in whose house she is a contentant. It is the same fertility shrine and the same celebration of the Husband's Wedding Day. The atmosphere is dry and sterile having none of the vigour and robust optimism of the ascetic and his fertility shrine that we encounter in R.K. Narayan's *The Painter of Signs*. Both Olivia and the young narrator become pregnant subsequently. Perhaps it is Jhabvala's way of mocking at Indian superstitions.

There is hardly any discussion of the higher, deeper aspects of Hinduism involved in her native world. The attempt has been made to concentrate on the more popular and eye-catching aspects as Tantra, Kali worship, Surtas, and Siva worship in the form of Linga. It is not a question of doubting her veracity or her observant eye as a writer. It is only to be regretted that excessive emphasis on the incongruities in Indian life makes her and her readers oblivious of the fact that India is this and much more. The source of her strength as well as weakness as an artist arises from the fact that she trains a consistent European eye on India and writes about what is most apparent and striking to her eye. In the process the truth about India becomes simplistic and one dimensional.

There is the uneasy and hard to believe combination of the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the sexual, the normal and the perverse in several situations in the novel's narrative framework. The indulgence in sex between odd pairs of lovers at odd places is to be noted. While the Nawab and Olivia pairing off has been discussed, the young narrator's behaviour is equally unpredictable. What she hopes to achieve by getting intimate with Indar Lal, her meek, abject middle class lover at the same spot, in the same manner, is not made clear. Beyond the fact that it is impossible to recreate the same experience and that different people and generations react differently to the same situation and experience, the narrator does not prove anything. Besides, Indar Lal is worlds apart from the Nawab, and Olivia's experience cannot be identical with the young narrator's by any stretch of imagination.

Child, the hippie who is picked up and encountered by the narrator is another enigma in the novel. She tells us that he uses her sexually to reach a higher plane of consciousness. Like Leo with her Swampy, here, this young girl too believes that there is some mysterious power emanating from him. He reminds her of "Lord Siva whose huge member is worshipped by devout Hindu women. At such times it seems to me that his sex is engendered by his spiritual practices, by all the chanting of the mantras he does sing, beads on hand on the floor of my room." (p. 69). This facile equation of Siva wor-

ship with sexual activities has been reiterated by foreign writers before Jhabvala too but what is to be regretted is the fact that she, who could write with so much of telling sympathetic detail about the plight of women, Indian and European, in her short stories, should choose to dwell on such negative aspects in a novel with so much of potential in it.<sup>33</sup> Ritu, the meek wife of Inder Lal, tyrannised by his mother and becoming mentally disturbed, would have made an interesting study. Chid too, with his original interest in Hindu asceticism and his reactions to Indian living would have proved interesting. Instead the author chooses to deal with him on a slick, superficial level and sends him scurrying away from India.

At novel's end, the sense of fertility, of aridity pervades the atmosphere. Olivia's pregnancy does not bring joy or fulfilment to either the Nawab or Douglas. Each side seeks to use it as a pretext or a pawn in the game of intrigue between the British and the Indians. Olivia has no choice but to abort the foetus surreptitiously; she elopes with the Nawab to evade the subsequent scandal in the British circle. The narrator pays a visit to her retreat on a remote mountain ledge up in the Himalayas in the north and the lonely bleak vigil she imagines Olivia to have escaped into is not particularly heart warming or stimulating. Olivia dies alone up here, the Nawab having died earlier of apoplexy, in New York, under greatly straitened circumstances: the end of their turbulent love is an anti climax, not worth all the troubles the narrator undergoes.

The latter, in trying to follow the same path, decides, however, to carry her baby to term with the help of some kind inmates in an ashram close to Olivia's mountain retreat. If the author hopes the birth of this baby to be a symbol of new life, of new beginnings amidst the arid, dry ruins encountered so far, it is a slim hope indeed. The world around her is as unready to welcome an offspring of doubtful parentage as it

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33. For fine, exquisitely drawn portraits of women, Indian and European in the short stories, see Betsy in "Passion", Daphne in "A Spiritual Call", Miss Tuhy in "Miss Sahib", all from *A Stronger Climate*; Lekha in "Lekha", Shakuntala in "The Housewife", Peggy in "The Aliens" and Durga in "The Widow" from *Like Birds, Like Fishes*



was during Olivia's times. The birth, under such circumstances, is equally futile and it cannot reverse the general pattern of sterile relationships all around the narrator. Her life is lacking in too many essentials so that it is an impossible task to fill up the gaps with any one request granted at the shrine of fertility.

### **The Distorted Vision**

Major Minnie's monograph on the influence of India on the European consciousness and character that the narrator quotes at length sums up in a concise way the European's reactions to India. It is Jhabvala who speaks through Major Minnie, when he refers to India as an enemy, to be guarded against, an enemy who finds out the weak spot and presses on it. The finest, the most sensitive of the Westerners are especially vulnerable as India seeks to pull them apart and destroy them. The author says :

Yes, concluded the Major, it is all very well to love and admire India—intellectually, aesthetically, he did not mention sexually, but he must have been aware of that factor too—but always with a virile measured European feeling. One should never, he warned, allow oneself to become softened (like Indians) by an excess of feeling; because the moment that happens, the moment one exceeds one's measure—one is in danger of being dragged over to the other side. (pp. 174-75)

India to Major Minnie and Jhabvala remains an opponent to be fought against from without and from within, especially from within one's own being. This is the attitude of puny human beings, towards India as an overwhelming reality. The relationship is imbued with a sense of all the things it must not be, a sense of utter futility.

The narrator in *Heat and Dust* says : "India always changes people and I have been no exception." (p. 2). After living in India for twenty-five years it seems to have turned Jhabvala bitter and corrosive. She tells us, in her commemorative lecture on the Scottish novelist Neil Gunn, that she had come to

loath India, that to avoid a breakdown of her personality, she chose a way of escape by seeking withdrawal and flight. There is some thing unsatisfyingly partial and ambiguous in her reaction to India, even if one agrees that there are enough reasons to bring about disillusionment if one lives under the Indian sky. Her list of symptoms, the swamis embodying "the corruption, degradation, the lies of human nature", "the tide of poverty, disease and squalor rising all around", "the heat, frayed nerves", and "the strange, alien, often maddening Indian character", can be extended further. Yet for generations, there have been Western men and women in India taking this and more in their stride. The truth about India, or for that matter, about any country, cannot be reduced to such simplistic terms.

Jhabvala's dilemma is stated when she tells us that living in India meant a constant struggle "to keep my own personality and not become drowned in India, to remain European." She feels her 'Europeanness' is threatened, that she can never become 'Indian', that if she stays on, India 'would attack her morally, it will destroy her personality'. Given the choice between staying on the suffering or escaping abroad; she chooses, like Esmond, the later route.<sup>34</sup> These formulations may be all right for her personally but they seem to do a disservice to an old culture and an ancient country, when taken as generalisations. Perhaps she was worn out by twenty-five years of living in an environment alien to her particular physical and emotional temperament. India, to such a woman, tired as she is, may have proved to be too much of a burden to bear and she seems to have chosen, wisely enough, for her to stay out.

Unfortunately, her recent work in fiction gives the impression that India is not only her particular burden but that of every White woman, that India is out to destroy the White man/woman's integrity, and that it is impossible for a Westerner to cultivate a simple, natural, un-exaggerated and realistic attachment to the country. There is some endeavour in modern

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34. R.F. Isar, "Is India Just Heat and Dust?," *The Hindusthan Times* (November 8, 1980), p. .

India, too, as in other developing nations, at least as obvious as the poverty and squalor, moral, social and physical, that could be written about as evidence for hope. When Jhabvala chooses to withdraw, it means a refusal to see India in human and historic terms.

There are enough incongruities in Indian life, enough for condemnatory judgments. A sensitive being, Indian or European, is often revolted and angered by the squalor, the grossness, the routine ritualism, the lip-service, to high flown but stultifying ideals, the petrified and distorted sense of values, and the hypocritical attitude towards religion and spirituality. There is a great need for the Indian woman to rise out of a great philosophy of despair which leads to passivity, detachment and acceptance. She has to become individualistic and assertive enough to break the shackles of *Karma*, the rather severe doctrine of determinism. But Jhabvala's mode of argument arises from a vision distorted by indignation and fear. Her examples of women in her fiction seem to make people unacquainted with India believe that all Indian women are contemptible, flighty or neurotic and pathetic creatures. The men fare worse than the women in her pantheon; together the characters give a distorted image of India to readers unacquainted with the country and her people. What she tells us is the truth about herself and not about India and yet the one is often confused with the other.

She writes exclusively from the point of view of her own dilemma, her temperamental alienation from her mixed background, her choice and her escape. To forget that this is not the norm for most women in India is to be wholly subjective, self-righteous and unreasonable. This undermines the validity arguments in fiction, this taxes the credibility of her fictive characters and falsifies her examples of Indian life. A distorted vision, distorted by anger and revulsion distorts truth in such a way that it becomes falsehood. Hence, though the veracity of her observations cannot be doubted, her negative, withdrawn and unconcerned approach clouds the picture and leads to an emphasis on the incongruities, the strange and bizarre aspects alone. One can attack and deno-

unce but cannot deny humanity to a whole nation; nor can Jhabvala continue, like Etta, to look down upon 'the natives' as somehow below and beneath her.

When the Indian woman feels ashamed of being Indian, when the European woman feels superior by virtue of her race and colour, it is difficult to endorse E.M. Forster's message of connecting the two. It is difficult, for Forster's protagonist Aziz tells his English friend Fielding that friendship can exist only between equals.<sup>55</sup> If no way is found to reconcile these apparently opposing sides, the East and the West, it results in a muddle, a waste of human potential.

The Women's Movement in the West has raised woman's sights and opportunities, putting her under tremendous pressure of wanting to be super woman in a fantasy world where man would share her responsibilities of child rearing and family life, leaving her free to develop her potentials fully; here, in India, the majority of women are still seeking the means to exist in the realm of necessity with a little bit of freedom that would allow them to survive as ordinary women doing ordinary things. The best they expect of life is to flow on smoothly, continuously as a stream. They know that hope and sorrow are intimately braided into their lives, that they cannot have it all—neither they, nor their daughters; nobody, for that matter.

## CHAPTER 8

# Conclusion : And She Shall Arise

*The day for moving mountains is coming.*

*You don't think so ?*

*It is coming : for a while the mountain sleeps,*

*But in other times*

*Mountains all moved in fire. If you do not believe that,*

*Oh man, this at least believe :*

*All sleeping women*

*Will awake now and move.*

—Yosano Akiko (1878-1942)<sup>1</sup>

*The title "Women and Fiction" might mean and you may have meant it to mean women and what they are like ; or it might mean women and the fiction that they write ; or it might mean women and a fiction that is written about them ; or it might mean that somehow all three are inextricably mixed together and you want me to consider them in that light.*

*All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point—a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction ; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved. I have shirked the duty of coming to a conclusion upon these two questions. Women and fiction remain, so far as I am concerned, unsolved problems.*

—Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*<sup>2</sup>

1. Yosano Akiko, "The Day", trans. William McNaughton in *Light from the East : An Anthology of Asian Literature : China : Japan, Korea, Vietnam and India*, ed. W. McNaughton (New York : Dell, 1978), p. 241.
2. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York : Harcourt Brace, 1929) pp. 3-4.

*Amid my own untidiness I think in wonder :  
 In the heart of Creation  
 Flow these two streams of Man and Woman.  
 Man gathers round him rubbish ;  
 Woman comes and constantly cleanses it away.*

—Rabindranath Tagore, *Wings of Death*<sup>3</sup>

*The women of today are in a fair way to dethrone the myth of femininity ; they are beginning to affirm their independence in concrete ways ; but they do not easily succeed in living completely the life of a human being. Reared by women, within a feminine world, their normal destiny is marriage, which still means practically subordination to man ; for masculine prestige is far from extinction, resting still upon solid, economic and social foundations.*

—Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*<sup>4</sup>

*You belong to such a uniquely free generation and that is something very new in our country. At least we have won our freedom and you can do as you choose. How much you can do—how many careers and vocations and all the spirit and intelligence to do it with ..... I hope you will not think it enough merely to be young, to be able to read any book you choose to read, to ride on a bus amongst silly young men, to go to a concert at night. With such opportunities at hand, you must surely want something greater than pleasure alone or the security of marriage alone—something more rare, more responsible.*

—Anita Desai, *Voices in the City*

The six preceding chapters have been detailed considerations of the woman in Indian fiction in English, through the novels of the authors chosen for study. The novelists make us feel that it is worthwhile to try and understand these women with the hope that such a scrutiny would have at least suggested some of the criteria upon which future studies of women in contemporary Indian fiction may be assessed. The aim here has been the directing of sustained literary interest towards the

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3. Rabindranath Tagore, "Man and woman", *Wings of Death in Light from the East*, ed. W. McNaughton (New York : Dell, 1978), p. 199.
  4. Simone de Beauvoir, Introduction to Book Two, *The Second Sex* (1969; rpt, Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1979), p. 30.

investigation and presentation of the woman's consciousness, towards an objective account of the woman's emotions, towards assessing Indian womanhood's confrontation against male reality, and the shifts in the general literary sensibility of the period towards her in each author and thereby placing the study of the Indian woman in modern Indian fiction in a critical perspective.

We realise, after a perusal of these women who as girls, wives, mothers and widows, confront a male dominated, tradition-oriented society and learn to live under the twin whips of domestic injustice and institutionalised tyranny that women's personality and behaviour are closely interwoven with the whole framework of the culture they spring from. Despite the changes in the norms, the variations in taste, in standards of judgment, the impact of Western culture and alien mores, economic and educational progress, she is essentially Indian in sensibility and likely to remain so.

#### 4. Theme, a Vitality

It has been shown that, in spite of the arguments against an exclusive interest in the woman thereby leading to a general impoverishment of the imaginative responses and one-sided appreciation of the inventive genius of the author under study, there is a basic fact which emerges from this study. The woman, by occupying frequently the dominant or most significant role in the plot, proves to be a potent vehicle for an author who wishes to express himself forcefully and has the talent to do so. An author's interest in the woman leads to his involvement with the problems of human development within Indian society as he conceives them. Passive or assertive, traditional or modern, she reflects his own insecurity, isolation, fear, bewilderment and emotional vulnerability. Even when the author chooses to withdraw from Indian society and seeks escape abroad, as is seen in the case of Jhabvala, even in such a negative approach, the woman becomes a mirror image of the author's own predicament.

The general shift in contemporary Indian literature from larger national and philosophical issues to emphasis on intror-

pection and individualism comes in handy for the author who transforms the female protagonist in his novel into an agent in his own quest for psychological insight and awareness.<sup>5</sup>

Narayan's portrayal of Daisy in whom the apogee of feminism is reached and Anita Desai's tormented heroines, Maya, Monica, Sita and Bimla are apt illustrations. The Western woman's difficulties in adjusting to the Indian environment and the Indian woman's forced accommodation of Western modes and values and subsequent readjustment and re-evaluation of her traditional values and the pains involved in resolving their dilemma between their aspirations and reality, between home-life, wifehood, motherhood on the one hand and career, personal fulfilment on the other, at instinctual and intellectual levels—all these are portrayed adequately by novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Jhabvala and others. Witness the struggles of Mrs Pickering in *The Nowhere Man*, Meera and Richard in *Some Inner Fury*, Caroline and Anasuya in *Possession*, Etta and Judy in *A Backward Place*, Gulab and Shakuntala in *Esmond in India* and Evie, Lee, and Margaret in *A New Dominion*. In spite of all the difficulties she faces in her headlong confrontation with reality, the woman's vigour and vitality remain undimmed. The Indian woman in her struggle for a new attitude toward reality has shown herself to be so persistent, vital, and vehement that, whenever and wherever she appears, she virtually wrests the novel from the hands of the author and stamps upon it the unmistakable imprint of her own desperate confrontation as a fighter, victim, heroine, or mother against what she refuses to accept as an immutable ordering of reality.

There is rage at times but also remarkable poise and good humour about the sticky business of dismantling an old set of standards and establishing new ones. She lends us her vision and we see what is common as rare, what is normal as

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5. H.M. Williams, *Studies in Modern Indian Fiction in English*, Vol. II (Calcutta : Writer's Workshop, 1973), p. 175. According to him, "The shift in the centre of interest from public life to the individual accompanies the sophistication of contemporary writing,"



strange and what is extraordinary as ordinary. She also makes us realise through her constant endeavours that development through conflict is part of the cost of living in this century. She is the harbinger of the novel of dissent. The doctrine of acceptance, of quietism compounded with non-violence and *Karma*, has died an imperceptible death in India in the post-Independence era.

In her we also see the continuity of the tradition developed by older novelists like Tagore, Prem Chand, Bankim Chandra, Sarat Chatterjee and more recently Mulk Raj Anand. These novelists were adept in the fusion of psychological and social interests and their woman protagonists serve this purpose skilfully. She is the symbol of their concern with the individual humanity of man in relation to the influence of the encroachments of modern urban, industrial and Westernised society upon it. Like Bhattacharya's Suruchi, she expresses their concern about a situation where so many of the former religious and social sanctions, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh are crumbling or, at best, are a matter of intense debate. The woman becomes the focal point of contact between the growling human consciousness and the alien world, between the author's harsh experience of reality and his hope for human salvation. Protagonists like Binodini, Gauri, Roshan, Meera, Savithri, Shantha, Monica and Bimla, to name only a few, impel the novelists older and younger male and female, towards a continuous discussion of social values, of the practical and permissible relationships between the sensitive individual and an insensitive society.

The woman is not always a symbol of growth, progress and forward movement. Varied as she is, she is also seen as a powerful means of withdrawal, regression, decay, death and destruction. The woman image contains not only the response of the author to his condition, but also the response of a whole society to itself. She ceases to be the symbol of growth, life, and fertility, when the author chooses her to illustrate the existential loneliness of the Indian, man or woman, beset as he is by so many problems material and spiritual. Life in India often turns out to be a harsh bitter struggle against so many

implacable odds like grinding poverty, harsh climate, lack of privacy and personal freedom and spiritual claustrophobia. Death seems to be the only palliative, the means of escape from a vicious existential circle.

The women in the novel portray this negation of the life and more. The mother in *Voices in the City* is portrayed by Anita Desai as Kali, the Goddess of destruction. Jhabvala's Evie in *A New Dominion* and Caroline in *Possession* by Markandaya are tormented by spiritual confusion that leads to aridity and annihilation of all warm, loving, life-giving relationships. In Desai's fictive world, Maya and Sita try withdrawal as a means of escape while Monica cuts asunder the thin thread by which she is connected to life. This picture suggests a possible relation between the image of the dying, death-dealing woman and the psychology of a repressive morality. These two fundamental polarities of woman as life giver, harbinger of sons and continuer of the race *versus* woman as dying agent and death dealer are amply illustrated in the novels which can be seen as the working out in formal fictive systems of what the Indian cultural milieu they spring from is unable to resolve in concrete terms. Despite the fact that no satisfactory resolution is ever achieved, the conflict is depicted vividly enough by the woman who is alert and aflame with vitality.

### **The Rise of Feminine Consciousness**

Exploring feminine consciousness is a fascinating experience in literature. The female protagonist in these novels permits us to share in the operations of her consciousness, though it reaches us filtered at two levels. She keeps her secrets and reveals what chooses, when and if the author so wills; yet she achieves a fictive truth stronger and deeper than conventional truth.

The awakening of consciousness is by no means an exclusive prerogative of any one period or any one sex. The woman, however, serves as the most adequate and fitting agent for the shaping of crises relevant to life in twentieth century. This is

particularly relevant in as much as an awareness of the relativism and disintegration of values has now generated into the foreground of the literary consciousness of our times. The old values are no longer capable of generating enough conviction in actual living to justify their continued representation in fictive form (the debunking of traditional values is a constant feature seen in almost all the women in these novels: the new values have also been found uniformly insufficient). Hence the anguish of heroines like Marina, Sima, Daisy and Sita, who have no more immediate succour than what has so far been offered by a shifting, baseless contemporary life. The novelist, impelled by the necessity of establishing values in narrative art, makes use of the female protagonists to assume them, such as they are, from the moral consciousness of our times. Or else he chooses to operate without any cohesive body of his values. Though the resulting decline and atrophy is better than a blind appropriation of any set of values, his art nevertheless suffers if dissociated from the world around him. The woman character is a convenient agent for him to establish a set of values, relative to one another that serve as the single concern in his variegated, inventive and artistic genius.

Let us look at the typological experience of the woman in the novels. It usually begins with a shock of recognition—as with Narayan's Savitri in *The Dark Room* or Marina in Datta's *Yajna in the City* or Sarda in Mahendraraya's *Tam Taram*. The next stage is intense introspection followed by a paralysis of will and cessation of action on the woman's part. This is, however, brief and she pulls herself together and ends her experience, as portrayed in the novel, with a conscious decision, an abrupt existential ending, which leads to a great deal of conjecture about her future. The author draws the curtain down after ushering in the decision which may vary from resigned acceptance of a mean, apologetic existence to choosing death and destruction.

Each of the novels in this study attempts to fictionally shape this experience of the awakening of the woman's consciousness. Though the methods of delineation and analysis in interpretation vary in their complexity, though there may be

innumerable gradations in the growth of feminine consciousness. it can be definitely demonstrated that this experience underlies the majority of the novels here under scrutiny. Often the correspondence is so close and precise as to enable the critic to define these novels as the metaphorical elongations of the basic fact of the awakening feminine consciousness.

It may be that there are some novels in the period covered, where the woman has no such experience, some novels where the male and not the female protagonist undergoes such an experience, and still other novels that do not make use of the typological crisis in consciousness and its consequent structural elements so that it precludes any possibility of being categorical about our conclusions.

However, on reading these novels, a few basic factors do emerge. More often than not, the reader becomes attuned to the fictional shaping of a very specific kind of crisis evinced generally through the vision of the female protagonist. He gets ready to analyze the nature of the structure repetitive enough to be noticed: the distribution of the elements of the experience, the treatment of the past, the abrupt awakening to the disintegration of the familiar world, the stasis of time followed by a period of intense self-analysis and painful introspection moving onwards to analysis of larger issues like life, death, *Karma*, and *Dharma*, and finally the abrupt ending in decision, leaving the reader to relate the work to others of its kind for the purpose of meaningful comparison.

The specific character of the crisis may vary in accordance with the problematics of the individual author, but the structure remains broadly stable enough to enable one to speak about the Novel of Feminine Consciousness. The author has enough room within the given structure to display his inventive genius and artistic skill and technique. In some novels the author shifts the abrupt awakening to the middle or to the end of the story. While Sita's mental crisis explodes right at the beginning, Monisha's predicament is made known to us gradually towards the middle of the novel. The duration of the crisis of the woman may also vary from several hours to several years.

The stasis of time can be rendered symbolically through illness, mental or physical. The abrupt coming to an existential end may also vary from novel to novel. The ending does not lead to a resolution of the woman's dilemma—there are no simple solutions anymore but the process of the awakening of her consciousness leads to her inner enrichment, and the existing bastion of male dominated hierarchy starts crumbling around the edges.

### The Myth of Sisyphus

When the woman awakens, she awakes to the absurdity of life which follows the disintegration of familiar reality. The Sisyphian myth is recreated. These contemporary novels have one significant feature in common which strikes the eye. These are novels of dissent which veer sharply from the traditional view in which the chief element was affirmation. The older classical protagonists like Shakuntala and Vasavdatta accepted the existing order of things. Now such total acceptance is rare even in novelists like Rao taking umbrage in his mythic past, and Narayan, who advocates acceptance as an ideology. The artist in them enables them to portray the obverse side of the coin in such problematic heroines as Madeleine, Rosie and Daisy.

Dissent can be viewed in two ways : the psychologist views women's protests as deriving from a neurotic dissatisfaction with their ordained lot. As Helene Deutsch states :

They (the women) often participate in violent anonymous protests and join revolutionary movements. Most of the time they are unconsciously protesting against their own fate. By identifying themselves with the socially oppressed or the non-possessing class, they take up a position against their own unsatisfying role.<sup>6</sup>

The novel of dissent also signifies the end of the age of conformity, prevalent in the fifties and sixties, typified in the bland-

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6. Helene Deutsch, *The Psychology of Women : A Psychoanalytic Interpretation* (1944, rpt. New York : Bantam, 1973), p. 293.

ness of the era of Nehru administration. Most people, in the euphoria of the immediate post-Independence years, believed in and remained happy with India and her possibilities. It is only in the seventies that a sense of dislocation, a sense of the loss of a stable reality sets in. Naipaul evokes the unending nullity of Hindu life, the intellectual depletion and the ensuing dissolution graphically in *India, A Wounded Civilization*.<sup>7</sup>

The loss of a stable reality is not unique in India ; it has been experienced as the central experience of man in modern times in the West as well. It is interesting to note, from the point of view of this study, that the writers of contemporary fiction in India have combined these ideas in a typological experience with a distinct profile—that of the women awakening to the disintegration of the familiar order, struggling during a period of introspection and coming to a painful abrupt decision. The woman is chosen as the agent most capable of experiencing this process tragically in a manner accessible to narrative representation. The tragedy of dissociation, and disintegration is acute in her who, from birth, is brought up to acknowledge an integral cosmic order, the Rita and Dharma. She becomes the symbol of imagination, of sensibility itself, of man ranged against the forces abroad actively denaturing humanity.

When the meaninglessness of the world is suddenly unmasked, when she is compelled to doubt and question all the beliefs she has inherited, experienced or learned, then she reaches the inevitable symbolic point of peripeteia, what Kafka calls the Archimedean point at which conventional reality takes on a wholly new and strange veneer and bewilders the human being. The woman is jolted out of her usual tracks of conformity or unquestioning acceptance and starts to reassess the entire meaning of her life that she has acquired so painfully and laboriously through her youth and adulthood.

The world to her is no longer beautiful or stable enough to give her comfort. The urgent compulsion to re-evaluation and

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7. V.S. Naipaul, *India : A Wounded Civilization* (Harmondsworth : Penguin 1977).

self scrutiny is painful. The collapse is recorded by Albert Camus in another context :

Rising, street car, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, street car, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm—this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the 'why' arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement 'Begins'—this is important. Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness. It awakes consciousness and provokes what follows.<sup>8</sup>

What follows is a Sisyphean dilemma, equally applicable to man and woman. In her urgency to determine a new meaning in life, she is led to either a false existence or else to death and destruction. Either way, it is painful and she is penalised. This sense of the essential absurdity of life, of wanton, wilful waste of human potential, comes through our reading of the novels.

### The Problem of Defining Equality

Any introspective scrutiny on the woman's part begins with the details of her wretched biology and ascends the deterministic scale, questioning all that has been held up to her as ideals so far. In her confrontation with a quietism compounded of *Karma*, non-violence, *Dharma*, and sexual inequality, the curious belief in the fundamental inferiority of women in almost all sectors of life proves to be a great obstacle. The women in these novels are seen, with their driving inwardness, as providing a dramatic point of view as they struggle from inadequate and unequal basis to achieve a measure of stability and inner peace. In real life, the report of the committee on the status of women in India illustrates how this belief in the lowliness of women has continued to guide Hindu polity.<sup>9</sup>

8. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. J. O'Brien (New York : Knopf, 1959), p. 10.

9. See *Status of Women in India : A Synopsis of the Report of the National Committee* (New Delhi : The Indian Council of Social Science Research, 1975).

Though Aristotle chose to ignore empirical evidence and announced that women, as inferior beings, had fewer teeth than men, his society produced a whole line of heroines like Electra, Medea, and Phaedra, marvelous beings who not only outshone and outranked their male counterparts, but also expressed forcefully the shock, mystery and existential agony and loneliness of the individual in times of change. The women in Indian fiction, too, are emerging out of darkness, throwing off their legacy of humiliation, dependence and resignation, and reaching out for an equitable share of man's worldly and spiritual goods.

The process of bridging the gap of inequality, the gaps between personal allegiance and objectivity, intellectual aspirations and biological reality, is by no means an easy one. Lonely and alienated, her back bent by biological necessity and environmental determinism, she yearns after the infinite, all the while restrained by the physical. Her dreams are negated on the lowest levels of biological play at the man-woman equation level. Time and again we see the Indian women as displaced, alienated figures, ground in the mill of convention, domestic injustice and institutionalised tyranny, the victims of their time, of their society, of their own romantic illusions. The two Savithris, the one in Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* and the other in Narayan's *The Dark Room* are typical examples of such women.

Most Indian women fictional as well as real, we find, have married because of social pressure and not because they wanted to or because they were in love. The concept of love in the Western sense does not find favour as it is not conducive to harmony, given the rigid social co-ordinates. Marriage is seen mainly as religious sacrament to fulfill the stages in one's life and to attain eternal salvation and secondarily as a duty towards the social order. It is also increasingly seen as security against economic and sexual aggression. This security they opt for or are forced to accept turns oppressive the moment they realise a man alone could never be a substitute for a life, her whole life. The irony of it all lies in the belated recognition that even the most brilliant male is incapable of basing a



marriage, a relationship with a woman on terms of equality. We recall Rama's experience with Madeleine and Savithri in Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*. What is certain is the fact that the concept of the hero has taken a tumble : the male protagonist is cut down to size and outflanked and outmaneuvered by the growing consciousness of the woman.

It is interesting to speculate what kind of relationship and literature would come from a situation where the mediating concept of equality operates. For the present, defining equality itself is a problem. It is usually swinging from one pole to the other. Even if the swing is in favour of the woman, it does not automatically ensure her personal fulfilment and happiness. Witness Daisy's predicament in Narayan's *The Painter of Signs*. Given every opportunity for being as emancipated as a woman in India could ever hope to be, she seems to transform herself from a sari'd angel into a totalitarian harpy, a symbol of titantic womanhood that desexes man. It is the author's way of warning against the repetition of the mistakes of a male-chauvinist society, this time by over zealous feminists who would lead to a cultural death wish and an androgynous blurring of social institutions.

None of the novels reviewed so far have invented any mediatory concept to bridge this gap, to resolve the unsolvable contradiction between male and female dominance. Every relationship, marital or otherwise, degenerates into a Sartrean tussle for possessing or being possessed. The author's attempt to articulate and build bridges between male dominance and female liberation does not meet with unqualified success.

The novels adhere to a pattern of defamiliarisation of the life of the average Indian woman. Liberation for women in India is not a static, free-standing concept. It is of recent origin ; statistics about the condition of the Indian woman, the number of dowry deaths and rape and assault cases, the vast pool of discrimination based on sex, the institution of women's studies—all these are sporadic and not recounted systematically in the press. Even if we were to know the exact numbers of women affected adversely an account of sexual discrimination,

the power of numbers being limited, they would tell only half of the true story.

The concept of the faithful, patient long-suffering wife exemplified by Sita in *The Ramayana* is slowly dying a hard death especially in urban centres. The romantic resolution of the binary opposition between the sexes, a happy marriage is no longer valid, not even in films. The Indian woman does not wait for a Prince Charming as the be-all and end-all of her dreams and problems. She is coming gradually to be perceived as not being archetypally different and inferior but as having the same drives, ambitions needs, egoism, sexuality and humanity as man. This is no mean achievement on the part of the intellectuals in a country which venerated Suttce worship not so long ago. Witness Bawaji Rao's recognition of Mohini as being equal to him in every possible way, including the sexual, in Markandaya's *The Golden Honeycomb*.

These novels bring home the realisation that the Indian Cinderella does not live happily ever after in marriage, does not live happily, for that matter, married or unmarried, does not "live" in the existential sense of the term. *Equality* and *liberation* are operative words which are hard to reconcile with existing reality even if wealth, beauty, education and opportunity are used as the means of tipping the balance in favour of the woman. Beauteous, intelligent, economically independent women, however rare and diligent they be, find it equally difficult to reach their full potential as human persons as their less fortunate sisters.

The novels can be seen as a spectrum presentation of the possible ways of dealing with the binary opposition of woman as subject *versus* woman as object, of male *versus* female dominance. The specific ways employed by the women protagonists to deal with the confrontation vary in accordance with the problematics of the individual author.

Though there are no radical solutions envisaged, the way each heroine confronts harsh reality head on, creating new patterns of revolt against established exploitative systems brings

in a new sexual resonance, a new vibrant way of looking at life, an inner area of enlightenment. However, transient or futile such a confrontation may be, while it lasts, it gives us a heady sense of exhilaration, a vicarious sense of participation. The vision transcends from the emancipation of the woman towards a better deal for humanity as a whole, especially for the poor, the underdog, all the disinherited of the earth, men and women, adults and children.

### **From Mythic Shelter to Modern Neuroses**

At one end of the spectrum we have Raja Rao who takes umbrage in the culture he springs from, the Brahmanic culture that he has imbibed so thoroughly that it precludes the resolving of the woman's dilemma in concrete terms. The pulling tensions between family life, tradition and religion *versus* personal fulfilment and career ambitions are recorded in detail in Saroja and Savithri in *The Serpent and the Rope*, but no attempt is made to resolve the issue. He reinforces the pattern of the doomed female by looking at the female characters as symbols of spiritual aspects of human life at the behest of the creative, male perceiver. One thing to be admired in him is treatment of immorality, stripping it, as he does, of all its dross and squalor. Marital infidelity becomes a non-issue when the women give off themselves with a magnificent generosity for the sake of a deep and genuine sympathy with fellow human beings with an intuitive sensitivity towards the finer aspects in human relationships. Though this may not be pragmatic, it makes for literary excellence, stemming as it does from his involvement with the individual subject-object relationship and not with mere gender identity. Humanity is a matter of being more than just a species according to him. He advocates, through Savithri and Shantha, an intensely mythic and personal solution to the dilemma of the Indian woman.

Bhattacharya shows us how the Indian woman, pure and noble, tries hard to defer to the models in her culture and yet is victimised. Even as a victim her redemptive influence is appreciated in a strife torn society. Despite the immense psychological demands placed on her as wife, mother, mistress,

companion, goddess and victim, despite the toll it takes on her with such awkward and strained poses, she comes forward resolutely to make music, to create harmony in life. She is envisaged as the connector of cultures, Eastern and Western, the bridge between tradition and modernity and the meeting point between physical and spiritual desires. Her arrogation of the masculine role is not envisaged at all. Mohini, Lekha and Suruchi are noble portraits of women doing good to the society they live in. Mohini transforms Behula into a model village, Lekha shatters the hypocrisy of organised religion, and Suruchi bridges the gap between Steeltown and Gandhi village. The picture he paints of the woman is idyllic, tender and charming, sometimes even too optimistic to be realistic.

Like all first-rate humorists Narayan reveals, in comic distortion, the most important elements of the experience of a generation. Janus-faced, the woman is portrayed as struggling between her instinctual desires for physical gratification and her intellectual needs for a career, prestige, and esteem. Amidst the variety of feminine temperaments encountered in his fictive world, we find the Indian woman's gradual transformation from meek Savithri into violent Rosie and Daisy who are never attractive role models for Indian womanhood to ponder about.

The idea of being an Indian woman undergoes a transformation in Daisy in *The Painter of Signs*. She brings an altogether new balance of power between the sexes. Even in a male-dominated, tradition-oriented society, she can establish values her own, since she has sufficient energy and volition to do so. She has sufficient inner strength to resist social pressure and place her integrity above the instincts of the herd.

Daisy is astute enough to note that romantic love is illusory, that it lays her open to masculine exploitation. Hence, despite its attractive proponent Raman, she renounces it resolutely and looks forward to a life that can be created independently of sex and be boundless in duration, joy and sympathy.

Narayan points out the necessity to avoid and the evils of rampant feminism leading to cultural and spiritual death ; his

most significant contribution through Daisy is the introduction of a woman who has thrown off the culturally imposed feelings of guilt and shame. Daisy is unique in that she does not accept her femaleness as a punishment for misdeeds in her previous life, as her *Karma* or ill fate or bad luck. She takes her womanhood naturally without any restraint or inhibition.

Indian feminism need go no further than her.

Markandaya also portrays the double pulls that the Indian woman is subject to : between tradition and modernity between Indian and Western ways of living and values, between her dignity as a human being and her duty as a daughter, wife and mother, between marrying for love and marrying for the family, between her desire for autonomy and her need for nurturance. She advocates a compromise in the elevation of her need for love, caring and autonomy into the larger concept of the sisterhood of man. The quest of autonomy for the self leads to nurturance of the family which in turn progresses to imaginative sympathy for the human race.

Rukmani and Meera are illustrations of women seeking to be independent, to be whole human beings. Nalini, Premala and Mohini join them in their quest for the tenderness of conjugal love and the warmth of filial relationships. Roshan, Usha and Anasuya take up their quest further in their commitment to issues larger than private consciousness or woman's grievances. In the novel *Two Virgins*, Lalitha illustrates the grim consequences and social ostracisation that the woman faces when she chooses to live only on the sensual level and breaks the social code.

Of all the novelists in this study, it is Kamala Markandaya who points out how the distortions in the economic and social order affect women more adversely than men. The poor and women are bracketed in such studies as Rukmani and Nalini. Through them she pleads for better education and employment opportunities so that the inherent biases in the social structure may be removed. Removal of disparities at

the economic level points to highly complex modalities of social change. Markandaya, however, does not rest with the economics of living or cross cultural imbalances. She evolves towards a larger concept of universal love, caring and concord which by its very extension ensures the endurance and vitality of Indian womanhood.

Desai explores the disturbed psyche of the modern Indian woman. She portrays her female protagonist trying to juggle domesticity, love, children, career and emotional fulfilment and ending up exhausted, on the verge of mental crises. Women like Monica, Sita, Amla and Bimla focus attention on the tensions involved in contemporary living and the inevitable concomitant of loneliness that forces every individual, man or woman, to draw upon his own inner resources eventually. The existential absurdity of life resolving into meaningless arid existence or into decay and death as portrayed by Maya, Monisha, Nanda Kaul and Sita is unforgettable. Their alienation is aggravated further by masculine pressure, power and prestige, emanating from solid economic and social foundations.

We come to Ruth Praver Jhabvala who expounds the burden of the white woman living in India. For her India is an overwhelming entity that drives her onwards to the inevitable choice between drowning and disaster by staying on and escape by withdrawal and flight. Most of the Western women in her fictive world choose the latter alternative. Jhabvala is at her best in her early novels, where the characters, almost all Indian, engage in a light-hearted reversal of the romantic tale of a girl meeting a boy and leading him into marriage. There is no deep involvement of the feminine consciousness in these gay stories where the woman is often naive. Fresh from college and with unfettered conscience, she succumbs to parental pressure and the lure of family money.

A lot of potent human experience comes down to us from a reading of these novels. We learn, in addition, quite a bit about the Indian woman not only as girl, wife mother, widow, and spinster but also as human person. She does not find a truly mature and harmonious union between the sexes ; she has



need to compete with anyone in order to feel accomplished, no need to indulge in the neurotic need to be protected and as Virginia Woolf puts it, "no need to hurry ; no need to sparkle, no need to be anybody but oneself."<sup>10</sup>

They realise that sex is but a small part of a woman's life, that a man knows little about her when he views her through black or rosy spectacles put upon his nose by his interest in sex, that in any case a woman's sexuality is more complex and refined than to expect it to be portrayed as a parody of male behaviour patterns and that she need not be seen only in relation to the other sex. While some novelists insist on disproven images of women—women as eternal victims, women as weak creatures who employ sex as their main weapon rather than intelligence and hard work—there are others who portray enough models of strong women who, having a truer vision of life, negate such traditional beliefs. The new Indian woman does not don the victim's role or make use of sexual play to succeed in life. She is portrayed as being engaged in building careers, relationships and identity on honest, down to earth foundations.

These are the strong women who can express themselves, do things, travel, live with the partner of their choice with or without marriage, control the reproductive functions of their own bodies and come to their own conclusions about major issues in life, religion and society. They are in a minority in Indian fiction, but their numbers are definitely growing, their inner strength earning them respect and self-esteem.

The buoyancy, youthfulness and high expectations of a newly independent India which were to be seen in the fifties and sixties have now disappeared. But the grimness prevalent in the subsequent decades has led to a loss of faith, enthusiasm and coherence. Indifference, violence, or else deathlike ennui are the choices one is faced with, choices which are the outcome of human frustration. Even so, the writer of Indian fiction continues to affirm the possibility of something positive beyond the darkness around, through the woman protagonist. In his





of change, and the variety of human condition. Lack of domestic privacy and personal freedom, the trying climate, the adjustments demanded by the joint family, and the weight of traditional mores complicate the woman's pitch further.

Women from a poor country are unable to detach the concept of emancipation from poverty. The Western woman is mobile, autonomous and able to exercise her choices in habitation and co-habitation on her own terms with no damage to her reputation. In India, dependency needs are so prevalent that the woman is caught between narrow worlds of non-choice and immobility. Marriage in the Indian context being a sacrament, every Indian woman looks upon it as the only suitable career open to her. Amidst all the paraphernalia of modesty and chastity, she trains herself to be a fit object for her man's pleasure. Dependency needs at the economic level pulls her down and she cannot declare like Virginia Woolf :

Food, house and clothing are mine forever. Therefore, not merely do effort and labour cease, but also hatred and bitterness. I need not hate any man. I need not flatter any man ; he has nothing to give me... Anything may happen when womanhood has ceased to be a protected occupation.<sup>13</sup>

The Indian woman has a long way to go before she reaches such self-sufficiency

Economic independence is obviously not enough. Family and marriage laws bind her completely. The norm of legal equality guaranteeing her the same quantum of civic and political rights exists mainly on paper. Bigamy, though prohibited under law, is freely practised. The Hindu wife is often forced to sign documents depriving herself of her legal rights and enabling her husband to remarry. Dowry, the menace of young unmarried girls, is ever demanded and given quietly by parents eager to see their children settled in marriage. Divorce and abortion are two issues used mainly to rouse the lawyers—they have not gained much currency. A shake up leading to

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13. Woolf, p. 65.

radical changes in the existing body of outmoded and rusty family laws is long overdue.

The need for a comprehensive bill to regulate marriage, dowry and divorce in Hindu society has long been felt; and yet the initiative has not been taken up, even by the few members of Parliament who happen to be women. A social reform bill that would seek to register all marriages under the law, that would make provisions for the remarriage of widows and divorces, that would make dowry a penal offence and that would ensure full benefits to the woman for inheritance of properties under the Hindu Code would go a long way in ensuring equality and equal opportunity for Indian women, at least legally if not in actual practice. That so many of the women in these novels manage to revolt and ask a few questions about the inequalities in the prevailing system, despite a plethora of dusty, outmoded and unfair laws and taboos, is remarkable indeed.

The image of inequality cuts across regions, political, economic, and social structures and systems of beliefs and concepts of culture. If we are to believe that this is mainly due to unequal access to education and employment and thereby leading to an unequal share in the decision making processes in public and private areas, we find, as has already been pointed out, that prejudice affects even the fortunate few endowed with education, inherited wealth, and environmental opportunity. The priorities shift according to social and religious milieu, caste, class and income. It is a struggle ranging all the way from survival on the sheer physical level to the quest for identity. The large mass of underprivileged, illiterate women in India have not only to be educated but also to be re-educated so that they can get rid of their dependency needs, break the pattern of sexuality and sensuality, and take their place as whole human beings on a plane of free intellectual and professional equality along with their men. It is a long and hazardous road ahead, but the women in the novels serve as beacon lights of hope and endeavour.

#### **What the Indian Woman Wants**

The woman's quest for liberation is not something new or unique to India. Such ideas are embedded in the social memory of the descendants of sacrificial generations all over

the world. They are the expressions of the aspirations of the poor, the exploited and the dominated in their long march towards freedom, justice and the humanisation of all men and women.

Yet the term *liberation* is a vaxing one ; it accommodates a host of meanings and it cannot possibly mean the same thing to everyone who gives it utterance. This study establishes the fact that the Indian woman cannot be ignored ; she is a human person, and to be a female is not to be a lesser human being. On this at least, all responsible persons, feminist and antifeminist, would agree. But many questions still remain.

It is arguably unfair to make use of a small, limited study as a microcosm of the women's movement and its related issues in India.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless the questions that are being asked and the assumptions that are being acted on in the novels tell us a great deal about Indian woman and the issues facing her in contemporary living.

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14. The National Conference on Women's Studies was held in April 1981 in Bombay, the proceedings of which have been summarised by Vina Mazumdar in "Challenge of Women's Studies," *Economic and Political Weekly* (May 16, 1981). The following excerpt, useful for the purposes of this study, is from "Challenge of Women's Studies", unsigned article, in *Economic and Political Weekly*, ed Krishna Raj (Bombay : Sanveeksha Publication, July 4, 1981), p. 1163.

In India after the large scale participation of women in the freedom struggle and concomitant with it, the emergence of social awakening about the oppressive conditions suffered by women, followed by the inclusion within the constitution of equality to women in all spheres there was a virtual absence of social movement on the woman's question until the seventies. The first few stirrings were felt in the early seventies as the social and economic crisis drove women to anti-price rise and other agitations, to be silenced along with other wider movements, by the imposition of the Emergency. Noteworthy of the pre-Emergency period is the setting up by the government in 1971 of the Committee on the Status of Women which produced its very valuable and substantial report in 1974. In the post-Emergency period of the last three years, fresh beginnings were made through the genesis of small women's groups in many cities and towns across the country which have made their presence felt through various protests, princi-

The problem arises when we try to define liberation for the woman in the Indian context. Does it mean just survival? Does it mean parting radically with all the forms of the past, all traditions, all religion and ritual? Liberation taken to its logical conclusion would also mean the break up of the family as a social unit: establishing androgynous and unisexual values, as has been shown, would not only mark the end of the civilisation that endorses such a trend, but would also deny personal fulfilment and happiness to the woman, torn as she is between her instinctual needs and intellectual aspirations. If liberation implies altering and reconstructing family life or else a reversal of the Hindu religion towards a matriarchal base, then the woman would have to wait for a long while indeed.

If we concentrate our sights on an egalitarian future, would we be satisfied with woman wresting corporate and political positions from men? The present system has been found faulty within the novels of our study. It channels women into fixed roles depriving them of a fair chance in life and considerably lowering their aspirations in all sectors. What form of political and social organisation is conducive to liberating women rapidly from their existing servitudes is a question that has hardly been posed. What are the limits to which the Indian polity can go in granting women equality, without endangering its continued existence and the happiness of all individuals, is another question to be answered.

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#### 14 (Contd)

polity on social issues. The social base for this small and sporadic protest movement has been developing in the past thirty years with the greater educational and employment opportunities offered to middle class women. The social awareness of this section has developed through the contradictions it faces within the Indian social framework and at the border level, through the social climate engendered by the movements at the national level ranging from Navdharma to the J6 Movement and more immediately by the experience of the suppression of all democratic and political rights during the Emergency. It has also been influenced by the growth of the women's movement in the West, which gained international proportions by the mid-seventies.

Amla's aunt in *Voices in the City* speaks of the necessity for every woman to have spirit and a profession.<sup>15</sup> The women during the Independence struggle in the forties rose in stature for they were adequately motivated and sexual discrimination disappeared when the nation as a whole was fighting for a new dawn. But in the grim eighties, women, steeped in prevailing cynicism, cannot hope to achieve one and all, professional satisfaction. Besides, is it practical or commendable to draw women into low wage slavery, the destiny of the majority of female workers? Nirad Chaudhry points out the denuding of all grace and spirit when women are forced to become wage earners.<sup>16</sup>

The imponderables remain with us. How to reconcile the women's demand for autonomy with her need for nurturance, and how to strike a balance in her juggling between home life, motherhood, career and spiritual fulfilment are some of the issues that need to be resolved. Since we are not talking about a separatist culture with androgynes romping free of all sexual restraint and constraint, since our vision does not transcend biology to get bogged down by such concepts as clonal reproduction, parthenogenesis and test-tube babies, since we are still far from the Western visions of flexitime, child care sharing, house-husbands and board room wives, since the vexing question as to whether gender differences are biologically or socially determined is yet to be answered, nothing like a consensus exists.

The old stereotypes like Sita, Shakuntala, and Nalayani are not valid anymore. The study shows us the crumbling of these ancient feminine role models. Newer models like Daisy, Usha, Bimla and Saroja illustrate the various ways of coping with contemporary reality. They do have some common features: they strive towards self fulfilment; they eschew the need to be defined in relation to man; they unite in dethroning the myths of femininity, motherhood and marriage; and they illustrate that emancipation is at best a slow evolutionary process.

15. Anita Desai, *Voices in the City*, p. 143.

16. Chaudhry, *To Live or Not To Live* (New Delhi: Orient, 1970), p. 142.

The need of the hour is a reassessment of what exactly the Indian woman wants. She chooses to opt out of the purposive control of man over her. She elects to exercise control over her own life, her own body, as for example, the right to have an abortion if she needs one. At the same time, she wants the grace and the tenderness associated traditionally with femininity. In other words, she wants to have it all, the best of both the worlds !

One way to reconcile these apparently opposing ideas is to envisage liberation as a process of development seen as an integral, cultural process, the development of everyman and woman, the whole of man and woman. Even in the West, the liberation of women has been partial and contradictory. People are looking for newer ways of living not only because there are limits to resources, to the absorptive capacity of human beings to inequality, and to exploitation, but also because they are positively motivated towards a larger concept of love, joy and sympathy towards fellow human beings and they want to transcend the bureaucratic society of programmed consumption. The true magnitude of the studies on the woman would be measured in the future years by the realisation they give to women—that they need not compete with anyone, that all they have to do is to march hand in hand with man and go forward as equal partners, sharing experiences and aspirations.

To achieve this, a gradual restructuring and organization of social forces and a mobilisation of political will towards the common good would be required. The final aim, eventually, is to create another international environment, economic, political and cultural, that would guarantee the self-reliant development of all human beings.

The Indian woman has come so far and has yet a long way to traverse.





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